

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of Gregor Eisenhorn, a prominent character from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. He is depicted as a man in a dark, ornate military uniform with a red cape and gold trim. He holds a large, futuristic pistol in his right hand and a glowing, skull-like artifact in his left. In the upper left, a winged, demonic creature is shown in flight. The setting is a dark, industrial environment with large gears and structures visible in the background.

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE NEW EISENHORN NOVEL

THE MAGOS

& THE DEFINITIVE CASEBOOK OF GREGOR EISENHORN
DAN ABNETT

SUGGESTED READING ORDER

**The books in brackets are provided for context.
They reflect the author's suggested reading order and do not
appear in this volume.**

PESTILENCE

MASTER IMUS' TRANSGRESSION

REGIA OCCULTA

(*XENOS*)

MISSING IN ACTION

(*MALLEUS*)

BACKCLOTH FOR A CROWN ADDITIONAL

THE STRANGE DEMISE OF TITUS ENDOR

(*HERETICUS*)

THE CURIOSITY

PLAYING PATIENCE

(*RAVENOR*)

THORN WISHES TALON

(*RAVENOR RETURNED*)

(*RAVENOR ROGUE*)

GARDENS OF TYCHO

THE KEELER IMAGE

PERIHELION

THE MAGOS

(*PARIAH*)

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THE MAGOS

& THE DEFINITIVE CASEBOOK OF GREGOR EISENHORN

DAN ABNETT



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WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



INTRODUCTION

Funny thing, it turns out you can write a book by accident.

Having written, you know, a... few books, I don't expect novels to take me by surprise. Novels are large creatures. They're like big and badly coordinated houseguests, who turn up and live with you for months at a time, sometimes overstaying their welcome, so that when they finally leave, you're happy to see the back of them, what with them keeping you up late, night after night, and leaving their plot threads in your sink. They also plan their visits months or even years in advance: at any point in the last decade, I could have told you, in order, what books I'd be writing this year, next year, and sometimes the year after that. They line up, take a number, and then go and sit in the waiting room, glaring at me, surrounded by their carrier bags full of reference books, clutching their lists of problems and demands.

Once in a while, they turn up without warning. That's fine. In fact, suddenly accommodating the unexpected is one of the real pleasures of being a freelance writer. It happens all the time in comics (my other job). I know what regular work I've got, but I often get asked to write a guest issue or filler issue at short notice to save a deadline, and suddenly I'm plunging into something, say Green Lantern or the Justice League, that wasn't in my head at all. However, an issue of a comic is an easier, smaller beast to find a spare room for.

On several occasions, I've been asked to write a book that, until I got the phone call, I'd had no thought of writing. Instead of contemplating a novel for months before getting to write it, stewing the ideas and ingredients in my head, I have to find my way into it without any time to psyche myself up first. You get fresh results that way. It happened with *Fell Cargo* (phone conversation precis: 'Can you write a novel about pirates real quick?'). It

also happened with *Xenos*, the first Eisenhorn novel. My Black Library editor mailed me a bunch of reference material for the (then) forthcoming *Inquisitor* RPG, believing the lovely art and images might be useful 40K inspiration for my work on the *Gaunt's Ghosts* novels. I was so inspired, I asked if I could write an inquisitor novel and, within a week, I was. I just jumped right in, and worked out what the hell I was doing as I went along.

That was 2001. Sixteen years and seven inquisitor novels later...

So I knew novels could be unexpected. And I also knew that novels sometimes turn into something completely different during the actual writing. I even knew I was capable of rewriting a book from scratch in a matter of weeks (the notorious 'backup' failure of *Honour Guard*).

But actually *by accident*...?

Turns out that can happen too.

The Eisenhorn books, and their successors, the Ravenor and Bequin books, have been very popular. What started as a spontaneous bit of fun with *Xenos* has grown to be a trilogy of trilogies, an interlinked and epic cycle that will conclude with *Penitent* and *Pandaemonium*, the last two parts of the Bequin series (and yes, I am going to write them soon. They've both taken a number. They're sitting in the waiting room).

Along the way, I have written a bunch of short stories featuring those characters. These shorts have often been produced to accompany the publication or new edition of an Inquisitor novel, something new to get people in the mood. Some of the stories ('Missing In Action', 'Backcloth For A Crown Additional' and 'Playing Patience') have become well known, because they are fixtures in the omnibus editions of Eisenhorn and Ravenor. About ten years ago, I thought about collecting all the shorts into an anthology, a companion volume to the trilogies. I thought completists might like to have all the Inquisitor short stories gathered in one volume that could sit on their shelves alongside the novels. It became clear that to make a collection of worthwhile length, I'd need to write new stories, and I began to do that, writing 'Master Imus' Transgression' and 'The Strange Demise Of Titus Endor'. Then I got stuck, on a short story called 'Nathan Inshabel on Elvara Cardinal' (ask me about that sometime), and the anthology never happened. 'Master Imus' and 'Titus Endor' were turned into audio dramas. The former has never been published in its original prose form.

This summer, my Black Library editor Nick Kyme mentioned the idea of an anthology again. Time had passed, and the number of stories that could

be included had increased. All we now needed to make a nice, book-length edition was a couple of new stories, or maybe a novella.

I got to work, intending to write a novella that would sit chronologically between the stories in the collection and *Pariah*, the first Bequin book. I took a look at the stories ready for inclusion, and worked out the best running order, and in doing so, suggested to Nick that there were three other old short stories that might be nice to include. These weren't Inquisitor stories at all: they didn't feature Eisenhorn or Ravenor or anyone else from those books. But they were stories I was very fond of, and I felt they would fit. They were all detective stories, procedurals, and they were also 'domestic 40K', which is the joke term we use to describe the Eisenhorn books – stories set AWAY from the battlefronts of the Warhammer 40,000 universe, stories about the planets and cities and people that the wars of 40K are trying to protect. If those three stories were going to be collected together anywhere, then an Eisenhorn anthology was the ideal place, if nothing else because they were examples of me exploring the writing method that I use in the Inquisitor books.

Then the accident happened. I began to think of ways of obliquely connecting most of the old stories, even the non-Eisenhorn ones, to the new novella. This appealed – rather than the stories being unrelated vignettes and incidents from Eisenhorn's career, they could be brought together by the novella to make a volume that was satisfyingly linked by themes and ideas.

And the novella was no longer a novella. I think I realised that around the 20,000 word mark. I warned Nick it was 'running a bit long'. He told me to carry on regardless. Three weeks later, I had a full-length novel. That's *The Magos*, which forms the last part of this volume. It's a brand new, entirely original Eisenhorn novel. It happened by accident, refusing to admit it was a novel even while I was writing it. It wraps the old stories in this anthology up in its arms and acts as a (major) prologue to *Pariah*.

It also, contrary to plan, becomes the entirely unintentional *fourth* novel in the Eisenhorn trilogy. Like I said, accidents happen.

So, this book contains old stories you may have read before, stories that have not been in print before, stories that you might not think of as belonging here, and a brand new Eisenhorn novel. Even if you have read (or heard, as audios) the old stories in this book before, I suggest you don't skip

them. When you reach *The Magos*, the effort of revisiting them will be rewarded.

While the stories here run in roughly chronological order, I have deliberately spaced a couple out to provide variety and contrast. For purists, I have written up a chronology to show the order in which they happen and how they relate to the novels of the Inquisitor cycle. But that's just the order in which they took place, not the order in which they are best *read*.

I hope you enjoy this unexpected addition to the Eisenhorn canon. If you've read *Pariah*, you'll know what happens next, but there are still some major surprises in here. *The Magos* is not a 'disposable' story. Pretty darn big things happen in it, things that have an unanticipated impact on Gregor Eisenhorn.

They certainly came as a surprise to me.

Dan Abnett

Maidstone, August 2017

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PESTILENCE

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The Archenemy infects this universe. If we do not pause to fight that infection here, within our own selves, what purpose is there in taking our fight to the stars?

– Apothecary Engane,
from his Treatise on Imperial Medicine

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I

It is my belief that memory is the finest faculty we as a species possess. Through the function of memory, we are able to gather, hone and transmit all manner of knowledge for the benefit of mankind, and the endless glory of our God-Emperor, may the Golden Throne endure forever more!

To forget a mistake is to be defeated a second time, so we are taught in the sermons of Thor. How may a great leader plan his campaign without memory of those battles won and lost before? How may his soldiers absorb his teaching and improve without that gift? How may the Ecclesiarchy disseminate its message to the universal populace without that populace holding the teachings in memory? What are scholars, clerks, historians or chroniclers but agencies of memory?

And what is forgetfulness but the overthrow of memory, the ruination of precious knowledge, and an abhorrence?

I have, in the service of His Exalted Majesty the Emperor of Terra, waged war upon that abhorrence all my life. I strive to locate things forgotten and return them to the custody of memory. I am a scrabbler in dark places, an illuminator of shadows, a turner of long unturned pages, an asker of questions that have lapsed, forever hunting for answers that would otherwise have remained unvoiced. I am a recollector, prising lost secrets from the taciturn universe and returning them to the safe fold of memory, where they might again improve our lot among the outflung stars.

My particular discipline is that of *Materia Medica*, for human medicine was my original calling. Our understanding of our own vital mechanisms is vast and admirable, but we can never know too much about our own biology and how to protect, repair and improve it. It is our burden as a species to exist in a galaxy riven by war, and where war goes, so flourish its

hand-servants, injury and disease. It may be said that as each war front advances, so medical knowledge advances too. And where armies fall back in defeat or are destroyed, so medical knowledge retreats or is forgotten. Such are the lapses I seek to redress.

Upon that very purpose, I came to Symbal Iota late in my forty-eighth year, looking for Ebhoe. To provide context, let me say that this would be the third year of the Genovingian Campaign in the Obscura Segmentum, and about nine sidereal months after the first outbreak of Uhlren's Pox among the Guard legions stationed on Genovingia itself. Also known, colloquially, as blood-froth, Uhlren's Pox was named after the first victim it took, a colour-sergeant called Gustaf Uhlren, of the 15th Mordian, if memory serves me. And I pride myself it does.

As a student of Imperial history, and *Materia Medica* too, you will have Uhlren's Pox in your memory. A canker of body and vitality, virulently contagious, it corrupts from within, thickening circulatory fluids and wasting marrow, while embellishing the victim's skin with foul cysts and buboes. The cycle between infection and death is at most four days. In the later stages, organs rupture, blood emulsifies and bubbles through the pores of the skin, and the victim becomes violently delusional. Some have even conjectured that by this phase, the soul itself has been corroded away. Death is inescapable in almost every case.

It appeared without warning on Genovingia, and within a month, the *Medicae Regimentalis* were recording twenty death notices a day. No drug or procedure could be found that began to even slow its effects. No origin for the infection could be located. Worst of all, despite increasingly vigorous programmes of quarantine and cleansing, no method could be found to prevent wholesale contagion. No plague carriers, or means of transmission, were identifiable.

As an individual man weakens and sickens, so the Imperial Guard forces as a whole began to fail and falter as their best were taken by the pestilence. Within two months, Warmaster Rhyngold's staff were doubting the continued viability of the entire campaign. By the third month, Uhlren's Pox had also broken out (apparently miraculously and spontaneously, given its unknown process of dispersal) on Genovingia Minor, Lorches and Adamanaxer Delta. Four separate centres of infection, right along the leading edge of the Imperial advance through the sector. At that point, the contagion had spread to the civilian population of Genovingia itself, and the

Administratum had issued a Proclamation of Pandemic. It was said the skies above the cities of that mighty world were black with carrion flies, and the stench of biological pollution permeated every last acre of the planet.

I had a bureaucratic posting on Lorches at that time, and became part of the emergency body charged with researching a solution. It was weary work. I personally spent over a week in the archive without seeing daylight as I oversaw the systematic interrogation of that vast, dusty body of knowledge.

It was my friend and colleague Administrator Medica Lenid Vammel who first called our attention to Pirody and the Torment. It was an admirable piece of work on his part, a feat of study, cross-reference and memory. Vammel always had a good memory.

Under the instruction of Senior Administrator Medica Junas Malter, we diverted over sixty per cent of our staff to further research into the records of Pirody, and requests were sent out to other Genovingian worlds to look to their own archives. Vammel and I compiled the accumulating data ourselves, increasingly certain we had shone a light into the right shadow and found a useful truth.

Surviving records of the Torment incident on Pirody were painfully thin, though consistent. It was, after all, thirty-four years in the past. Survivors had been few, but we were able to trace one hundred and ninety-one possibles who might yet be alive. They were scattered to the four cosmic winds.

Reviewing our findings, Senior Malter authorised personal recollection, such was the gravity of the situation, and forty of us, all with rank high administrator or better, were despatched immediately. Vammel, rest his soul, was sent to Gandian Saturnalia, and was caught up in a local civil war and thereafter killed. I do not know if he ever found the man he was looking for. Memory is unkind there.

And I, I was sent to Symbal Iota.

II

Symbal Iota, where it is not covered in oceans that are the most profound mauve in colour (a consequence, so I understand, of algae growth), is a hot, verdant place. Rainforest islands ring the equatorial region in a wide belt.

I made 'fall at Symbalopolis, a flat-topped volcanic outcrop around whose slopes hive structures cluster like barnacles, and there transferred to a trimaran, which conveyed me, over a period of five days, down the length of the local island group to Saint Bastian.

I cursed the slowness of the craft, though in truth it skated across the mauve seas at better than thirty knots, and on several occasions tried to procure an ornithopter or air conveyance. But the Symbali are a nautical breed who place no faith in air travel. It was tortuous, and I was impatient. It had taken ten days to cross the empyrean from Lorches to Symbal Iota aboard a Navy frigate. Now it took half that time again to cross a distance infinitesimally smaller.

It was hot, and I spent my time below decks, reading data-slates. The sun and sea wind of Symbal burned my skin, used as it was to years of lamplit libraries. I took to wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat above my Administratus robes whenever I ventured out on deck, a detail my servitor Kalibane found relentlessly humorous.

On the fifth morning, Saint Bastian rose before us out of the violet waters, a pyramidal tower of volcanic flue dressed in jungle greenery. Even as we crossed the inlet from the trimaran to the shore by electric launch, turquoise seabirds mobbing over our heads, I could see no discernible sign of habitation. The thick coat of forestation came right down to the shore, revealing only a thin line of white beach at its hem.

The launch pulled into a cove where an ancient stone jetty jutted out from under the trees like an unfinished bridge. Kalibane, his bionic limbs whirring, carried my luggage onto the jetty and then helped me over. I stood there, sweating in my robes, leaning against my staff of office, batting away the beetles that circled in the stifling humidity of the cove.

There was no one there to greet me, though I had voxed word of my approach several times en route. I glanced back at the launch pilot, a dour Symbali, but he seemed not to know anything. Kalibane shambled down to the shore-end of the jetty and called my attention to a copper bell, verdigrised by time and the oceans, that hung from a hook on the end of the pier.

'Ring it,' I told him, and he did, cautiously, rapping his simian fingers against the metal dome. Then he glanced back at me, nervously, his optical implants clicking under his low brow-ridge as they refocused.

Two sisters of the Ecclesiarchy shortly appeared, their pure white robes as stiff and starched as the bicorn wimples they wore on their heads. They seemed to regard me with some amusement, and wordlessly ushered me to follow them.

I fell in step behind them, and Kalibane followed, carrying the luggage. We took a dirt path up through the jungle, which rose sharply and eventually became stepped. Sunlight flickered spears of light through the canopy above and the steaming air was full of exotic birdsong and the fidget of insects.

At a turn in the path, the Hospice of Saint Bastian Apostate suddenly stood before me. A great, stone-built edifice typical of the early Imperial naïve, its ancient flying buttresses and lower walls were clogged with vines and creepers. I could discern a main building of five storeys, an adjacent chapel, which looked the oldest part of the place, as well as outbuildings, kitchens and a walled garden. Above the wrought iron lych-gate stood a weathered statue of our beloved God-Emperor smiting the Archenemy. Inside the rusty gate, a well-tended path led through a trimmed lawn, punctured by tombstones and crypts. Stone angels and graven images of the Adeptus Astartes regarded me as I followed the sisters to the main door of the hospice.

I noticed then, fleetingly, that the windows of the two uppermost storeys were rigidly barred with iron grilles.

I left Kalibane outside with my possessions and crossed the threshold behind the sisters. The main atrium of the hospice was a dark and deliciously cool oasis of marble, with limestone pillars that rose up into the dim spaces of the high vault. My eyes lighted on the most marvellous triptych at the altar end, beneath a stained-glass oriole window, which I made observance to at once. In breadth, it was wider than a man's spread arms, and showed three aspects of the saint. On the left, he roamed the wilderness, in apostasy, renouncing the daemons of the air and fire; on the right, he performed the miracle of the maimed souls. In the centre panel, his martyred body, draped in blue cloth, the nine bolter wounds clearly countable on his pallid flesh, he lay in the arms of a luminous and suitably mournful Emperor.

I looked up from my devotions to find the sisters gone. I could feel the subliminal chorus of a psychic choir mind-singing nearby. The cool air pulsed.

A figure stood behind me. Tall, sculptural, his starched robes as white as his smooth skin was black, he seemed to regard me with the same amusement that the sisters had shown.

I realised I was still wearing my straw hat. I removed it quickly, dropping it onto a pew, and took out the pict-slate of introduction Senior Malter had given me before I left Lorches.

‘I am Baptrice,’ he said, his voice low and genial. ‘Welcome to the saint’s hospice.’

‘Higher Administrator Medica Lemual Sark,’ I replied. ‘My dedicated function is as a recollector, posted lately to Lorches, Genovingia general group four-five-seven-seven decimal, as part of the campaign auxiliary clerical archive.’

‘Welcome, Lemual,’ he said. ‘A recollector. Indeed. We haven’t had one of your breed here before.’

I was uncertain quite what he meant, though in hindsight, the detail of his misunderstanding still chills me.

I said, ‘You were expecting me? I voxed messages ahead.’

‘We have no vox-caster here at the hospice,’ Baptrice replied. ‘What is outside does not concern us. Our work is focused on what is inside... Inside this building, inside ourselves. But do not be alarmed. You are not intruding. We welcome all who come here. We do not need notice of an arrival.’

I smiled politely at this enigmatic response, and tapped my fingers on my staff. I had hoped they would be ready for me, and have everything in place so that I could begin my work immediately. Once again, the leisurely pace of Symbal Iota was weighing me down.

‘I must, Brother Baptrice, proceed with all haste. I wish to begin my efforts at once.’

He nodded. ‘Of course. Almost all who come to Saint Bastian are eager to begin. Let me take you through and provide you with food and a place to bathe.’

‘I would rather just see Ebhoe. As soon as it is possible.’

He paused, as if mystified.

‘Ebhoe?’

‘Colonel Fege Ebhoe, late of the Twenty-Third Lammark Lancers. Please tell me he is still here! That he is still alive!’

‘He... is.’ Baptrice faltered, and looked over my pict-slate properly for the first time. Some sort of realisation crossed his noble face.

‘My apologies, Higher Sark. I misconstrued your purpose. I see now that you are an acting recollector, sent here on official business.’

‘Of course!’ I snapped. ‘What else would I be?’

‘A suppliant, coming here to find solace. An inmate. Those that arrive on the jetty and sound the bell are always that. We get no visitors except those who come to us for help.’

‘An... inmate?’ I repeated.

‘Don’t you know where you are?’ he asked. ‘This is the Hospice of Saint Bastian, a refuge for the insane.’

III

An asylum! Here was an inauspicious start to my mission. I had understood, from my research, that the Hospice of Saint Bastian was home to a holy order that offered sanctuary and comfort for those brave warriors of the Emperor’s legions who were too gravely wounded or disabled by war to continue in service. I knew the place took in the damaged and the lost from warzones all across the sector, but I truly had no notion that the damage they specialised in was wounds to the psyche and sanity. It was a hospice for the deranged, individuals who presented themselves at its gates voluntarily in hope of redemption.

Worst of all, Baptrice and the sisters had presumed me to be a suppliant! That damned straw hat had given me just the air of madness they were expecting. I was lucky not to have been unceremoniously strapped into a harness and placed in isolation.

On reflection, I realised I should have known. Bastian, that hallowed saint, was a madman who found sanity in the love of the Emperor, and who later cured, through miracles, the mentally infirm.

Baptrice pulled a bell cord, and novitiates appeared. Kalibane was escorted inside with my luggage. We were left alone in the atrium, as Baptrice went to make preparations. As we waited, a grizzled man with an old tangle of scar-tissue where his left arm had been crossed the hall. He was naked save for a weathered, empty ammunition belt strung around his torso. He looked at us dimly, his head nodding slightly. Then he padded on his way, and was lost from view.

Somewhere, distantly, I could hear sobbing, and an urgent voice repeating something over and over again. Hunched at my side, his knuckles resting on the flagstones, Kalibane glanced up at me anxiously, and I put a reassuring hand on his broad, hairy shoulder.

Figures appeared around us: haggard, tonsured men in long black ecclesiarch vestments, and more phantom sisters in their ice-white robes and horned cowls. They grouped in the shadows on either side of the atrium, and watched us silently. One of the men rehearsed silently from long ribbons of parchment that a boy-child played out for him from a studded casket. Another scribbled in a little chapbook with his quill. Another swung a brass censer around his feet, filling the air with dry, pungent incense.

Baptrice reappeared. 'Brethren, bid welcome to Higher Administrator Sark, who has come to us on official business. You will show him every courtesy and cooperation.'

'What official business?' asked the old priest with the chapbook, looking up with gimlet eyes. Magnifying half-moon lenses were built into his nasal bone, and rosary beads hung around his dewlapped neck like a floral victory wreath.

'A matter of recollection,' I replied.

'Pertaining to what?' he pressed.

'Brother Jardone is our archivist, Higher Sark. You will forgive his persistence.' I nodded to Baptrice and smiled at the elderly Jardone, though no smile was returned.

'I see we are kindred, Brother Jardone. Both of us devote ourselves to remembrance.'

He half-shrugged.

'I am here to interview one of your... inmates. It may be that he holds within some facts that even now may save the lives of millions in the Genovingian group.'

Jardone closed his book and gazed at me, as if waiting for more. Senior Malter had charged me to say as little as I could of the pandemic, for news of such a calamity might spread unrest. But I felt I had to give them more.

'Warmaster Rhyngold is commanding a major military excursion through the Genovingian group. A sickness, which has been named Uhlren's Pox, is afflicting his garrisons. Study has shown it may bear comparison with a plague known as the Torment, which wasted Pirody some three decades

past. One survivor of that epidemic resides here. If he can furnish me with any details of the incident, it may be productive in securing a cure.'

'How bad is it, back on Genovingia?' asked another old priest, the one with the censer.

'It is... contained,' I lied.

Jardone snorted. 'Of course it is contained. That is why a higher administrator has come all this way. You ask the most foolish things, Brother Giraud.'

Another man now spoke. He was older than all, crooked and half-blind, his wrinkled pate dotted with liver spots. A flared ear-trumpet clung to the robes of his left shoulder with delicate mechanical legs. 'I am concerned that questioning and a change to routine may disturb the serenity of the hospice. I do not want our residents upset in any way.'

'Your comment is noted, Brother Niro,' said Baptrice. 'I'm sure Higher Sark will be discreet.'

'Of course,' I assured them.

It was late afternoon when Baptrice finally led me upstairs into the heart of the hospice. Kalibane followed us, lugging a few boxed items from my luggage. Ghostly, bicorned sisters watched us from every arch and shadow.

We proceeded from the stairs into a large chamber on the third floor. The air was close. Dozens of inmates lurked there, though none glanced at us. Some were clad in dingy, loose-fitting overalls, while others wore ancient fatigues and Imperial Guard dress. All rank pins, insignia and patches had been removed, and no one had belts or bootlaces. Two were intently playing regicide on an old tin board by the window. Another sat on the bare floor planks, rolling dice. Others mumbled to themselves or gazed into the distance blankly. The naked man we had seen in the atrium was crouching in a corner, loading spent shell cases into his ammunition belt. Many of the residents had old war wounds and scars, unsightly and grotesque.

'Are they... safe?' I whispered to Baptrice.

'We allow the most stable freedom to move and use this common area. Of course, their medication is carefully monitored. But all who come here are "safe", as all who come here come voluntarily. Some, of course, come here to escape the episodes that have made regular life impractical.'

None of this reassured me.

On the far side of the chamber, we entered a long corridor flanked by cell rooms. Some doors were shut, bolted from outside. Some had cage-bars

locked over them. All had sliding spy-slits. There was a smell of disinfectant and ordure.

Someone, or something, was knocking quietly and repeatedly against one locked door we passed. From another we heard singing.

Some doors were open. I saw two novitiates sponge-bathing an ancient man who was strapped to his metal cot with fabric restraints. The old man was weeping piteously. In another room, where the door was open but the outer cage locked in place, we saw a large, heavily muscled man sitting in a ladder-back chair, gazing out through the bars. He was covered in tattoos: regimental emblems, mottoes, kill-scores. His eyes glowed with the most maniacal light. He had the tusks of some feral animal implanted in his lower jaw, so they hooked up over his upper lip.

As we passed, he leaped up and tried to reach through the bars at us. His powerful arm flexed and clenched. He issued a soft growl.

‘Behave, Ioq!’ Baptrice told him.

The cell next door to Ioq’s was our destination. The door was open, and a sister and a novitiate waited for us. The room beyond them was pitch-black. Baptrice spoke for a moment with the novitiate and the sister. He turned to me. ‘Ebhoë is reluctant, but the sister has convinced him it is right that he speaks with you. You may not go in. Please sit at the door.’ The novitiate brought up a stool, and I sat in the doorway, throwing out my robes over my knees. Kalibane dutifully opened my boxes and set up the transcribing artificer on its tripod stand.

I gazed into the blackness of the room, trying to make out shapes. I could see nothing.

‘Why is it dark in there?’

‘Ebhoë’s malady, his mental condition, is exacerbated by light. He demands darkness.’ Baptrice shrugged.

I nodded glumly and cleared my throat. ‘By the grace of the God-Emperor of Terra, I come here on His holy work. I identify myself as Lemual Sark, Higher Administrator Medica, assigned to Lorches Administratum.’

I glanced over at the artificer. It chattered quietly and extruded the start of a parchment transcription tape that I hoped would soon be long and informative. ‘I seek Fege Ebhoë, once a colonel with the Twenty-Third Lammark Lancers.’

Silence.

‘Colonel Ebhoe?’

A voice, thin as a knife, cold as a corpse, whispered out of the dark room. ‘I am he. What is your business?’

I leaned forwards. ‘I wish to discuss Pirody with you. The Torment you endured.’

‘I have nothing to say. I won’t remember anything.’

‘Come now, colonel. I’m sure you will if you try.’

‘You misunderstand. I didn’t say I “can’t”. I said I “won’t”.’

‘Deliberately?’

‘Just so. I refuse to.’

I wiped my mouth, and realised I was dry-tongued. ‘Why not, colonel?’

‘Pirody is why I’m here. Thirty-four years, trying to forget. I don’t want to start remembering now.’

Baptrice looked at me with a slightly helpless gesture. He seemed to be suggesting that it was done, and I should give up.

‘Men are dying on Genovingia from a plague we know as Uhlren’s Pox. This pestilence bears all the hallmarks of the Torment. Anything you can tell me may help save lives.’

‘I couldn’t then. Fifty-nine thousand men died on Pirody. I couldn’t save them though I tried with every shred of my being. Why should that be different now?’

I gazed at the invisible source of the cold voice. ‘I cannot say for sure. But I believe it is worth trying.’

There was a long pause. The artificer whirred on idle. Kalibane coughed, and the machine recorded the sound with a little chatter of keys.

‘How many men?’

‘I’m sorry, colonel? What did you ask me?’

‘How many men are dying?’

I took a deep breath. ‘When I left Lorches, nine hundred were dead and another fifteen hundred infected. On Genovingia Minor, six thousand and twice that number ailing. On Adamanaxer Delta, two hundred, but it had barely begun there. On Genovingia itself... two and a half million.’

I heard Baptrice gasp in shock. I trusted he would keep this to himself. ‘Colonel?’

Nothing.

‘Colonel, please...’

Cold and cutting, the voice came again, sharper than before. ‘Pirody was a wasted place...’

IV

Pirody was a wasted place. We didn’t want to go there. But the Archenemy had taken the eastern continent and razed the hives, and the northern cities were imperilled.

Warmaster Getus sent us in. Forty thousand Lammark Lancers, virtually the full strength of the Lammark regiments. Twenty thousand Fanchos in armour and their machines, and a full squad of Adepts Astartes, the Doom Eagles, shining grey and red.

The place we were at was Pirody Polar. It was god knows how old. Cyclopean towers and columns of green marble, hewn in antique times by hands I’m not convinced were human. There was a strangeness to the geometry, the angles never seemed quite right.

It was as cold as a bastard. We had winter dress, thick white flak coats with fur hoods, but the ice got in the lasguns and dulled their charges, and the damned Fanchos tanks were forever refusing to start. It was day, too: day all the time. There was no night, it was the wrong season. We were so far north. The darkest it got was dusk, when one of the two suns set briefly, and the sky turned flesh-pink. Then it would be daylight again. We’d been on and off for two months. Mainly long-range artillery duels, pounding the ice-drifts. No one could sleep because of the perpetual daylight. I know two men, one a Lammarkine, I’m not proud to say, who gouged out his eyes. The other was a Fanchos.

Then they came. Black dots on the ice-floes, thousands of them, waving banners so obscene, they...

Whatever. We were in no mood to fight. Driven mad by the light, driven to distraction by the lack of sleep, unnerved by the curious geometry of the place we were defending, we were easy meat. The forces of Chaos slaughtered us, and pushed us back into the city itself. The civilians, about two million strong, were worse than useless. They were pallid, idle things, with no drive or appetite. When doom came upon them, they simply gave up.

We were besieged for five months, despite six attempts by the Doom Eagles to break the deadlock. Faith, but they were terrifying! Giants,

clashing their bolters together before each fight, screaming at the foe, killing fifty for every one we picked off.

But it was like fighting the tide, and for all their power, there were only sixty of them.

We called for reinforcements. Getus had promised us, but now he was long gone aboard his warship, drawn back behind the fleet picket in case things got nasty.

The first man I saw fall to the Torment was a captain in my seventh platoon. He just collapsed one day, feverish. We took him to the Pirody Polar infirmium, where Subjunctus Valis, the Apothecary of the Doom Eagles company, was running the show. An hour later, the captain was dead. His skin had blistered and bubbled. His eyes had burst. He had tried to kill Valis with a piece of the metal cot he had torn from the wall brace. Then he bled out.

You know what that means? His entire body spewed blood from every orifice, every pore. He was a husk by the time it was over.

In the day after the captain's death, sixty fell victim. Another day, two hundred. Another day, a thousand. Most died within two hours. Others lingered... for days, pustular, agonised.

Men I had known all my life turned into gristly sacks of bone before my eyes. Damn you, Sark, for making me remember this!

On the seventh day, it spread to the Fanchos as well. On the ninth, it reached the civilian population. Valis ordered all measure of quarantine, but it was no good. He worked all hours of the endless day, trying to find a vaccine, trying to alleviate the relentless infection.

On the tenth day, a Doom Eagle fell victim. In his Torment, blood gouting from his visor grilles, he slew two of his comrades and nineteen of my men. The disease had overcome even the Adeptus Astartes purity seals.

I went to Valis, craving good news. He had set up a laboratory in the infirmium, where blood samples and tissue-scrapes boiled in alembics and separated in oil flasks. He assured me the Torment would be stopped. He explained how unlikely it was for a pestilence to be transmitted in such a cold clime, where there is no heat to incubate and spread decay. He also believed it would not flourish in light. So he had every stretch of the city wired with lamps so that there would be no darkness.

No darkness. In a place where none came naturally, even the shadows of closed rooms were banished. Everything was bright. Perhaps you can see

now why I abhor the light and cling to darkness.

The stench of blood-filth was appalling. Valis did his work, but still we fell. By the twenty-first day, I'd lost thirty-seven per cent of my force. The Fanchos were all but gone. Twelve thousand Pirodian citizens were dead or dying. Six Doom Eagles had succumbed.

Here are your facts if you want them. The plague persisted in a climate that should have killed it. It showed no common process of transmission. It brooked no attempt to contain or control it, despite efforts to enforce quarantine and cleanse infected areas with flamers. It was ferociously contagious. Even Space Marine purity seals were no protection. Its victims died in agony.

Then one of the Doom Eagles deciphered the obscene script of one of the Chaos banners displayed outside the walls.

It said...

It said one word. One filthy word. One damned, abominable word that I have spent my life trying to forget.

V

I craned in at the dark doorway. 'What word? What word was it, colonel?' With great reluctance, he spoke it. It wasn't a word at all. It was an obscene gurgle dignified by consonants. The glyph-name of the plague-daemon itself, one of the ninety-seven Blasphemies that May Not Be Written Down.

At its utterance, I fell back off my stool, nausea writhing in my belly and throat. Kalibane shrieked. The sister collapsed in a faint, and the novitiate fled.

Baptrice took four steps back from the doorway, turned, and vomited spectacularly.

The temperature in the corridor dropped by fifteen degrees.

Unsteady, I attempted to straighten my overturned stool and pick up the artificer that the novitiate had knocked over. Where it had recorded the word, I saw, the machine's parchment tape had begun to smoulder.

Screaming and wailing echoed down the hall from various cells. And then, Ioq was out.

Just next door, he had heard it all, his scarred head pressed to the cage bars. Now that cage door splintered off its mount and crashed to the corridor floor. Berserk, the huge ex-Guardsman thrashed out and turned towards us.

He was going to kill me, I'm certain, but I was slumped and my legs wouldn't work. Then Kalibane, bless his brave heart, flew at him. My devoted servitor rose up on his stunted hind limbs, the bionics augmenting his vast forelimbs throwing them up in a warning display. From splayed foot to reaching hand, Kalibane was eleven feet tall. He peeled back his lips and screeched through bared steel canines.

Froth dribbling from his tusked mouth, Ioq smashed Kalibane aside. My servitor made a considerable dent in the wall.

Ioq was on me.

I swept my staff of office around, and thumbed the recessed switch below the head.

Electric crackles blasted from the staff's tip. Ioq convulsed and fell. Twitching, he lay on the floorboards, and evacuated involuntarily. Baptrice was on his feet now. Alarms were ringing and novitiates were rushing frantically into the corridor with harness jackets and clench poles.

I rose and looked back at the dark doorway. 'Colonel Ebhoe?'

The door slammed shut.

VI

There would be no further interview that afternoon, Brother Baptrice made plain, despite my protests. Novitiates escorted me to a guest chamber on the second floor. It was whitewashed and plain, with a hard, wooden bed and small scriptorium table. A leaded window looked out onto the graveyard and the jungles beyond.

I felt a great perturbation of spirit, and paced the room as Kalibane unpacked my belongings. I had come so close, and had begun to draw the reluctant Ebhoe out. Now to be denied the chance to continue when the truly dark secrets were being revealed!

I paused by the window. The glaring, crimson sun was sinking into the mauve oceans, throwing the thick jungles into black, wild relief. Seabirds reeled over the bay in the dying light. Stars were coming out in the dark blue edges of the sky.

Calmer now, I reflected that whatever my internal uproar, the uproar in the place itself was greater.

From the window, I could hear all manner of screams, wails, shouts, banging doors, thundering footsteps, rattled keys. The word of blasphemy that Ebhoe had spoken had thrown all the fragile minds in this house of

insanity into disarray, like red-hot metal plunged into quenching cold water. Great efforts were being made to quieten the inmates.

I sat at the teak scriptorium for a while, reviewing the transcripts while Kalibane dozed on a settle by the door. Ebhoe had made particular mention of Subjunctus Valis, the Doom Eagles Apothecary. I looked over copies of the old Pirody debriefings I had brought with me, but Valis' name only appeared in the muster listings. Had he survived? Only a direct request to the Doom Eagles Chapter house could provide an answer, and that might take months. The Adeptus Astartes are notoriously secretive, sometimes downright blatant in their uncooperative relationship with the Administratum. At best, it might involve a series of formal approaches, delaying tactics, bargaining. Even so, I wanted to alert my brethren on Lorches to the possible lead.

I damned Saint Bastian when I remembered the place had no vox-caster! I couldn't even forward a message to the astropathic enclave at Symbalopolis for transmission off-world.

A sister brought me supper on a tray. Just as I was finishing, and Kalibane was lighting the lamps, Niro and Jardone came to my chamber.

'Brothers?'

Jardone got right to it, staring at me through his half-moon lenses. 'The brotherhood of the hospice have met, and they decided that you must leave. Tomorrow. No further audiences will be granted. We have a vessel that will take you to the fishing port at Math Island. You can obtain passage to Symbalopolis from there.'

'I am disappointed, Jardone. I do not wish to leave. My recollection is not complete.'

'It is as complete as it's going to be!' he snapped.

'The hospice has never been so troubled,' Niro said quietly. 'There have been brawls. Two novitiates have been injured. Three inmates have attempted suicide. Years of work have been undone in a few moments.'

I nodded. 'I regret the disturbance, but—'

'No buts!' barked Jardone.

'I'm sorry, Higher Sark,' said Niro. 'That is how it is.'

I slept badly in the cramped cot. My mind, my memory, played games, going over the details of the interview. There was shock and injury in Ebhoe, that was certain, for the event had been traumatic. But there was

something else: a secret beyond anything he had told me, some profound memory. I could taste it.

I would not be deterred. Too many lives depended on it.

Kalibane was slumbering heavily when I crept from the chamber. In the darkness, I felt my way to the stairs, and up to the third floor. There was a restlessness in the close air. I moved past locked cells where men moaned in their sleep or muttered in their insomnia.

At intervals, I hugged the shadows as novice wardens with lamps made their patrols. It took perhaps three-quarters of an hour to reach the cell block where Ebhoe resided. I stalked nervously past the bolted door of Ioq's room.

The spy-slit opened at my touch.

'Ebhoe? Colonel Ebhoe?' I called softly into the darkness.

'Who?' his cold voice replied.

'It is Sark. We weren't finished.'

'Go away.'

'I will not, until you tell me the rest.'

'Go away.'

I thought desperately, and eagerness made me cruel. 'I have a torch, Ebhoe. A powerful lamp. Do you want me to shine it in through the spy-hole?'

When he spoke again, there was terror in his voice. Emperor forgive me for my manipulation.

'What more is there?' he asked. 'The Torment spread. We died by the thousand. I cannot help with your cause, though I pity those men on Genovingia.'

'You never told me how it ended.'

'Did you not read the reports?'

I glanced up and down the dark cell block to make sure we were still alone. 'I read them. They were... sparse. They said Warmaster Getus incinerated the enemy from orbit, and ships were sent to relieve you at Pirody Polar. They expressed horror at the extent of the plague-loss. Fifty-nine thousand men dead. No count was made of the civilian losses. They said that by the time the relief ships arrived, the Torment had been expunged. Four hundred men were evacuated. Of them, only one hundred and ninety-one are still alive according to the records.'

'There's your answer then.'

‘No, colonel. That’s no answer! How was it expunged?’
‘We located the source of infection, cleansed it. That was how.’
‘How, Ebhoe? How, in the God-Emperor’s name?’
‘It was the height of the Torment. Thousands dead...’

VII

It was the height of the Torment. Thousands dead, corpses everywhere, pus and blood running in those damnably bright halls.

I went to Valis again, begging for news. He was in his infirmium, working still. Another batch of vaccines to try, he told me. The last six had failed, and had even seemed to aggravate the contagion.

The men were fighting themselves by then, killing each other in fear and loathing. I told Valis this, and he was silent, working at a flame burner on the steel workbench. He was a huge being, of course... Adeptus Astartes, a head and a half taller than me, wearing a cowled red robe over his Doom Eagles armour. He lifted specimen bottles from his narthecium, and held them up to the ever-present light.

I was tired, tired like you wouldn’t believe. I hadn’t slept in days. I put down the flamer I had been using for cleansing work, and sat on a stool.

‘Are we all going to perish?’ I asked the great Apothecary.

‘Dear, valiant Ebhoe,’ he said with a laugh. ‘You poor little man. Of course not. I will not allow it.’

He turned to face me, filling a long syringe from a stoppered bottle. I was in awe of him, even after the time we had spent together.

‘You are one of the lucky ones, Ebhoe. Clean so far. I’d hate to see you contract this pestilence. You have been a faithful ally to me through this dark time, helping to distribute my vaccines. I will mention you to your commanders.’

‘Thank you, Apothecary.’

‘Ebhoe,’ he said, ‘I think it is fair to say we cannot save any who have been infected now. We can only hope to vaccinate the healthy against infection. I have prepared a serum for that purpose, and I will inoculate all healthy men with it. You will help me. And you will be first. So I can be sure not to lose you.’

I hesitated. He came forwards with the syringe, and I started to pull up my sleeve.

‘Open your jacket and tunic. It must go through the stomach wall.’ I reached for my tunic clasps.

And saw it. The tiniest thing. Just a tiny, tiny thing. A greenish-yellow blister just below Valis’ right ear.

VIII

Ebhoe fell silent. The air seemed electrically charged. Inmates in neighbouring cells were thrashing, restless, and some were crying out. At any moment, the novitiate wardens would come.

‘Ebhoe?’ I called through the slit.

His voice had fallen to a terrified whisper, the whisper of a man who simply cannot bear to put the things haunting his mind into words.

‘Ebhoe?’

Keys clattered nearby. Lamplight flickered under a hall door. Ioq was banging at his cell door and growling. Someone was crying, someone else was wailing in a made-up language. The air was ripe with the smell of faeces, sweat and agitated fear.

‘Ebhoe!’

There was no time left. ‘Ebhoe, please!’

‘Valis had the Torment! He’d had it all along, right from the start!’ Ebhoe’s voice was strident and anguished. The words came out of the slit as hard and lethal as las-fire. ‘He had spread it! He! Through his work, his vaccines, his treatments! He had spread the plague! His mind had been corrupted by it, he didn’t know what he was doing! His many, many vaccines had failed because they weren’t vaccines! They were new strains of the Torment bred in his infirmium! He was the carrier: a malevolent, hungry pestilence clothed in the form of a noble man, killing thousands upon thousands upon thousands!’

I went cold. Colder than I’d ever been before. The idea was monstrous. The Torment had been more than a waster of lives; it had been sentient, alive, deliberate... planning and moving through the instrument it had corrupted.

The door of Ioq’s cell was bulging and shattering. Screams welled all around, panic and fear in equal measure. The entire hospice was shaking with unleashed psychoses.

Lamps flashed at the end of the block. Novitiates yelled out and ran forward as they saw me. They would have reached me had not Ioq broken

out again, rabid and slaving, throwing his hideous bulk into them, ripping at them in a frenzy.

‘Ebho!’ I yelled through the slit. ‘What did you do?’

He was crying, his voice ragged with gut-heaving sobs. ‘I grabbed my flamer! Emperor have mercy, I snatched it up and bathed Valis with flame! I killed him! I killed him! I slew the pride of the Doom Eagles! I burned him apart! I expunged the source of the Torment!’

A novitiate flew past me, his throat ripped out by animal tusks. His colleagues were locked in a desperate struggle with Ioq.

‘You burned him.’

‘Yes. The flames touched off the chemicals in the infirmium, the sample bottles, the flasks of seething plague water. They exploded. A fireball... Oh gods... brighter than the daylight that had never gone away. Brighter than... fire everywhere... liquid fire... flames around me... all around... oh... oh...’

Bright flashes filled the hall, the loud discharge of a las weapon.

I stepped back from Ebho’s cell door, shaking. Ioq lay dead amid the mangled corpses of three novitiates. Several others, wounded, whimpered on the floor.

Brother Jardone, a laspistol in his bony hand, pushed through the orderlies and ecclesiarchs gathering in the hall, and pointed the weapon at me.

‘I should kill you for this, Sark. How dare you!’

Baptrice stepped forwards and took the gun from Jardone. Niro gazed at me in weary disappointment.

‘See to Ebho,’ Baptrice told the sisters nearby. They unlocked the cell door and went in.

‘You will leave tomorrow, Sark,’ Baptrice said. ‘I will file a complaint to your superiors.’

‘Do so,’ I said. ‘I never wanted this, but I had to reach the truth. It may be, from what Ebho has told me, that a way to fight Uhlren’s Pox is in our reach.’

‘I hope so,’ said Baptrice, gazing bitterly at the carnage in the hall. ‘It has cost enough.’

The novitiates were escorting me back to my room when the sisters brought Ebho out. The ordeal of recollection had killed him. I will never forgive myself for that, no matter how many lives on Genovingia we saved.

And I will never forget the sight of him, revealed at last in the light.

IX

I left the next day by launch with Kalibane. No one from the hospice saw me off or even spoke to me. From Math Island, I transmitted my report to Symbalopolis, and from there, astropathically, it lanced through the warp to Lorches.

Was Uhlren's Pox expunged? Yes, eventually. My work assisted in that. The blood-froth was like the Torment, engineered by the Archenemy, just as sentient. Fifty-two medical officers, sources just like Valis, were executed and incinerated.

I forget how many we lost altogether in the Genovingia group. I forget a lot, these days. My memory is not what it was, and I am thankful for that, at times.

I never forget Ebhoe. I never forget his corpse, wheeled out by the sisters. He had been caught in the infirmium flames on Pirody Polar. Limbless, wizened like a seed-case, he hung in a suspensor chair, kept alive by intravenous drains and sterile sprays. A ragged, revolting remnant of a man.

He had no eyes. I remember that most clearly of all. The flames had scorched them out.

He had no eyes, and yet he was terrified of the light.

I still believe that memory is the finest faculty we as a species own. But by the Golden Throne, there are things I wish I could never remember again.

MASTER IMUS' TRANSGRESSION

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‘I suppose,’ he sniffed, ‘you get a lot of cases like mine.’

The officer did not reply. In the ten minutes since Master Imus had been received, the officer had made very few remarks, except to announce his credentials and ask a few general questions.

Master Imus had presented himself, of his own volition, at the portico of the dark, unfriendly building late that afternoon. He had been invited to wait in an anteroom off the inner yard.

The anteroom was cold and forlorn. The fretful fingers of individuals previously invited to wait there had marked the white plaster with a greasy patina, and pacing feet had worn the wooden floor. There were no windows, but light poked in through a trio of dingy filters. From outside, faraway, Master Imus could hear the street noises of workers flooding home to their habs and their evening meals.

Master Imus sat in one of the old wooden chairs provided.

A clerk attended him first. The clerk led Master Imus through to a side office panelled in dark wood, and sat him at a small desk. The clerk was hunched over with the weight of the stenogram built into his chest. He sat on a stool, handed Master Imus a form, and told him to read out the questions printed on it and answer them in his own words. As Master Imus spoke, haltingly at first, the clerk’s bird-foot hands pecked the keys of the stenogram and recorded his comments. The stenogram clattered like an adding machine, a sound that made Master Imus feel exceptionally sad.

When the form was completed, the clerk left the office, and was replaced, after a few minutes, by a second clerk. The second clerk led Master Imus into a chamber that smelled of machine heat, and was cluttered with banks of whirring cogitators.

The second clerk examined Master Imus’ papers, and copied them on one of the cogitators. Several versions of Master Imus’ biographical particulars

flashed up on the multiple screens for a moment and then faded into a dull, green glow. This slow, silent dissolution of all he was seemed unpleasantly symbolic to Master Imus.

He was taken back to the anteroom, and left alone again. The daylight was ebbing. A small lamp had been lit in his absence. Master Imus waited for twenty minutes, and then the officer arrived.

‘Johan Imus?’ the officer asked as he entered the room, reading from a data-slate.

Master Imus stood up.

‘That’s me, sir,’ he said.

The officer was a tall, well-made man with dark hair. He was dressed, and this came as no surprise to Johan Imus, in black clothes and a black leather coat. The officer looked Master Imus up and down with unforthcoming eyes, and announced his credentials with a cursory wave of his rosette.

‘You have been received for inspection. Follow me, please,’ he said.

Master Imus followed him obediently. He followed him across the twilight yard, in through an archway, and up an endless flight of varnished stairs. The officer opened a door, and ushered Master Imus into a small room. The room had a large, ornamental fireplace that looked as if it had not seen a fire in centuries. A gilt clock ticked on the mantle. There was a rug on the wooden floor, and two plain chairs on either side of a desk. An armchair stood in one corner, a comfortable and friendly item of furniture that Master Imus never got to sit in.

They took their seats on either side of the desk.

‘What is the nature of the crime you are confessing?’ the officer asked, after studying the data-slate for a few minutes.

‘Not a crime, as such,’ Master Imus replied hastily.

‘No?’

‘A transgression. Yes, transgression, that is a better word altogether.’

‘The nature of the transgression, then?’

‘I have already explained this,’ Master Imus offered, ‘to the clerk.’

The officer scrolled back through the slate’s files. ‘Have you born false witness to this statement as I read it?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Were you coerced, invited or urged to make this report?’

‘No, sir,’ Master Imus said. ‘I have come here of my own volition. I... I said as much.’

‘That is noted here, strenuously. You made that point several times during the preliminary examinations.’

‘I simply wanted it to be clear,’ said Master Imus. ‘I was persuaded to come here by my own conscience, nothing else.’

The officer was silent for a moment. ‘You say you have been suborned by the Ruinous Powers, drawn into their evil, and set upon an unholy task?’

Master Imus nodded.

‘I suppose,’ he sniffed, ‘you get a lot of cases like mine.’

‘Everything must be held carefully to account,’ stated Johan Imus. ‘I am an indentured book-keeper and a citizen of Imperial Hesperus, the latter an honour I hold even more dear than my work at Slocha and Daviov et Cie. My father was keeper of books for Slocha and Daviov, and his before him. My work, like theirs, involves the enumeration of company accounts, the allocation of funds, the scrutiny of audits, and the day-to-day upkeep of financial income and outgoings. I have held my post for sixty-two years, and run a department of eighteen under-keepers. No, I have no wife. No kin to speak of. My work is my life.

‘Slocha and Daviov? An illustrious auction house, surely you’ve heard of it? Well, it maintains offices in the Garcel Commercial, just off the Place Fourteenth Jaumier. In the main, we deal with antique furnishing, silks, Sameterware, Brashin mannequins, and fine arts. The sale rooms are on Varsensson’s Street, beside the lifter depot. There are open fare sales every Mainsday, and specialist auctions every other Solday. Occasionally, we hold irregular fetes for particular customers or particular treasures. Last Gorgonsday, we offered a list that included eight small ouslite busts by Sambriano Kelchi and a series of humaniques from the jokaero ruins on Tornish.

‘No, sir, I am no connoisseur. My salary does not provide me with the funds to collect or speculate. But funds are my business. I am painstaking and exact in my work. I would never wish to cause Master Slocha or Master Daviov professional embarrassment by misplacing a decimal point or wrongly adding a column of figures.

‘This is why I have come. I do not make mistakes.

‘Ah, well, now you ask, we come to the meat of it, I suppose. Last Solday I set out to review the quarterly accounts. The year end looms, and

the Imperial tithe statements must be returned correctly. I found an error. Well, not an error so much as an aberration. Something that could not be accounted for. It was an idle annoyance at first, but the more I studied the pages of the ledger, the more peculiar it became.

‘There was a void, you see. A void – a gap or empty place in the flow of the accounts that defied explanation. It was as if a page or two were missing from my ledger.

‘No, not at all. This was the master ledger. Only I had access to it.

‘Sir, you belittle my craft with such a question. I keep books, and I have kept books my whole life. I am a creature of accuracy. It was not simply a matter of a creeping error, a stray sub-total. There were figures missing. Simply missing. And yet, a page or two on, the books balanced, seamlessly, as if there had been no hole.

‘This is what I mean by the word ‘void’. Numbers are my language, my life. I know when they are lying. There was a void in the accounts, and the more I struggled to identify it, the more the figures hid it from me. It was as if they were closing ranks to conceal the truth.

‘Why have I come to you with a book-keeping error? Sir, again you mock me. It was no error. I reviewed and recalculated. I redid the accounts eight times. As I added to this column and subtracted from that, the numbers began to betray me. They became numbers that I did not understand.

‘Sir, I believe I have calculated something that should not be. I believe I have found the Number of Ruin.’

He regarded Master Johan Imus for a moment. Such a small man, shrivelled by age, his sparrow bones lost in heavy robes that had evidently been cut to fit his father or his grandfather. The gilt clock ticked on the mantle. Its face had no hands, a simple ordo trick. The constant, measured ticking was all that mattered. Tock, tock, tock, flicking time away without a trace of its passage on the enamelled face. Guilt got them all in the end.

Imus possessed a small, neat face with a wide, slit mouth that might have revealed a toothy grin had the circumstances been different. His hair was straggly and white, and he wore half-moon eyeglasses. His knuckles bulged with arthritis.

‘The Number of Ruin?’ asked the officer.

Imus nodded. ‘That is my transgression. Will it be painless?’

‘Will what be painless?’

Imus struggled. 'My punishment. I presume... Well, censure is inadequate. Will it be burning? Poison?'

The officer had been making notes in a small copy book. He dipped his pen into the desk's power well.

'Do you believe you have committed a crime, sir?' he asked.

'No, no not at all. But I believe I have become a crime. I am a criminal thing.'

'I see.'

Master Imus sat forwards and adjusted his eyeglasses. 'I see you are quite a young man, sir. Will this have to go to a superior?'

'My superior?'

'Yes, sir. I imagine something this grave-'

'My master's name is Hapshant. He is indisposed, an old ailment. I hold the rank of interrogator, as I told you. I can deal with this matter.'

'Oh, good. That's good. Very good. So, how will you proceed?'

The officer stared at Master Imus. 'Forgive me, Imus, you don't seem alarmed at all by this process.'

'Alarmed?' Imus echoed. 'Of course I'm alarmed. I'm terrified. I've been terrified of this day all my life.'

'Why?'

'Because it happens to us all, sooner or later, doesn't it? Every day of my working life, I have walked to work up Sarum Street, and come by this place, so dark and unfriendly. I never pass it without a shudder. It is mortality. It is the fate that awaits us all should we cross the line. Do you think it was easy coming here today? No, sir. It has taken me a week to find the confidence. This afternoon, as I raised my hand to rap at the door, my courage almost fled. But I am a true citizen of Imperial Hesperus. I am a true son of the Emperor. It was my duty to report this, no matter what fate awaits me.'

The officer nodded. The clock ticked.

'Tell me what you understand by "the Number of Ruin",' said the officer.

Master Imus sat back and shrugged. 'It is an impossible number, an abomination. It is a notation of filthy power. Numbers own power, you see. My father raised me to respect three and seven, thirteen and the triple sixes, the primes, the constants. But the Number of Ruin, that is the number of--'

'Of?'

‘Of the warp,’ Imus whispered, looking to one side and then the other as if in fear of being overheard.

The officer nodded his head. ‘So Hapshant has taught me. Can you show me the number? Can you write it down?’

‘Are you mad?’

‘This room is warded and I am armed. Can you show me the number?’ Master Imus took a data-slate from his robe pocket. It was battered and worn from use. He activated it and entered a series of digits into the display.

‘There are the accounts,’ he said, pausing before handing the slate over. ‘I have selected the key section. Please be careful.’

The officer held out his hand. ‘Show it to me, please, sir.’

Master Imus hesitated. ‘What did you say your name was, young man?’ ‘Eisenhorn,’ the officer replied. ‘Interrogator Eisenhorn of the Emperor’s Holy Ordos. Why?’

‘Please, please be careful with this, Interrogator Eisenhorn.’

Master Imus handed the old data-slate to the officer. The officer looked at the screen with a slight frown.

The gilt clock stopped ticking. A strange silence filled the room.

‘I–’ the officer began to say, and caught fire. Blue flames, as hot as a burner torch, consumed his skin and roasted the flesh off his bones until nothing remained except dripping, blackened meat and a charred skull wrenched into a rictus by heat-tightened sinews. The data-slate dropped onto the desk from a smoking, skeletal hand with a thump. The officer’s clothing was untouched.

The flames guttered out and the scorched corpse slumped forwards with a crack of dry ligaments. Imus got up and backed away. His eyes were wide. He fought back a terrible desire to urinate.

‘Someone,’ he murmured, ‘someone, anyone... help me!’ He reached the door and tried to open it, but it was locked. He knocked on it, gingerly, as if hoping someone on the other side might open it without being put to too much trouble.

A hand took his arm.

‘Please sit down, Master Imus,’ the officer said.

Master Imus started rather badly and recoiled with such surprise he banged his elbows and the back of his head against the door. The officer, who was not burned in any way, was standing in front of him.

‘Master Imus?’

Master Imus began to shake. Then he started to hiccup. He continued to stare at the officer.

‘What did you see?’ the officer asked.

‘You were on fire,’ replied Master Imus. ‘You caught fire. The fire burned you until you were dead!’

‘Master Imus?’

Johan Imus repeated his previous commentary, this time forcing his voice to actually make some sounds.

‘Ah,’ said the officer, ‘an illusion, that’s all, necessary to the work.’

‘Necessary?’ asked Master Imus. ‘Necessary how? To what work?’

‘To my work.’ The officer gestured towards the chair Imus had vacated. He paused. His tone became more sympathetic. ‘I apologise. I have shaken you, haven’t I?’

Master Imus shrugged and managed a small, dry laugh. ‘Indeed. I have never seen a man combust before. I have never even seen a man die. How was the illusion done? What was the point of frightening me?’

The officer’s sympathetic air melted. ‘I’m not about to answer any questions, sir. All the questions will be mine.’

There were a great many of them. They came at Master Imus so rapidly, he became rather flustered. The officer asked him the names of his parents, and his votation numeral, and inquired of his political leanings. He asked Master Imus to account for his whereabouts on certain dates stretching back two years. He asked if Master Imus could operate a cogitator, if he held keys to the auction house premises, if he had ever been off-world, and where his family originated from. Master Imus attempted to answer as best he could. Sometimes a new question came at him before the last answer had been completely recited. Is there a record of public misdemeanours in your family? How long have you resided at your current address? Can you detail your diet in general terms? Are you receiving medicae treatment for any ailment? Have you ever been to Ausolberg? How many languages do you speak? How many languages do you read? Do you dream? What do you dream about? How often do you attend templum services? Have you ever taken the Standard Psykana Test? Have you ever been in trouble before?

‘Am I in trouble now?’ asked Master Imus.

He was made to wait in the anteroom again. Night had fallen. The lamp, almost out of promethium, fluttered valiantly.

The officer came to get him, and led him out into the street. The evening was warm and humid. Master Imus could smell the roasting and poaching and frying underway in the kitchens of the local eating houses. A few pedestrians passed by along the pavement under the street lamps.

‘Where are we going?’ Master Imus asked.

‘What did I tell you about questions?’ the officer asked. Master Imus pursed his lips and shrugged.

Two men joined them from the dark building. One was an old, shuffling being in long, dark robes. The other was a young man, of an age and mode of dress that matched the officer’s. This man was more handsome, however, more genial in his countenance.

‘Is this the fellow?’ he asked.

The officer nodded.

‘Let’s process this, Gregor,’ the man requested. ‘I had plans for tonight.’ They walked down the street. The officer and the other young man walked on either side of Master Imus, like an escort of gaolers walking a convict to the scaffold. The old, hunched man followed them.

‘We will inspect your hab,’ the officer said.

‘Of course,’ said Master Imus. ‘It’s not far.’

Master Imus took out his keys and opened the deadbolts of his door one by one. A baby was crying loudly on the floor below, and the stairwell was pungent with the odour of steamed cabbage. Mistress Elver, from down the landing, came out and made a point of sweeping her front step so she could get a good look at the dark men Master Imus had brought home with him.

As Master Imus finished the business of unlocking, the officer’s companion turned to look at Mistress Elver.

‘Are these your eyes, goodwife?’ he called. ‘I found them in the back of my head.’

Mistress Elver bridled and went inside. The young man laughed.

‘Don’t start, Titus,’ the officer said.

The other man leaned against the wall.

‘Nosey old bitch,’ he remarked.

‘Forty-eight,’ said the old man lurking behind them.

‘Forty-eight what?’ asked the officer, turning.

‘Steps. Two flights of twenty-four. Asquar spruce, not local. Vitrian glass in the lamp housings, though some of them have been replaced by cheaper alternatives.’

‘And this is pertinent how?’ inquired the young man called Titus. The old man shrugged with a bionic hiss. ‘Oh, it’s not.’

Master Imus opened the door. He felt rather ashamed of the musty smell that breathed out of the doorway.

The officer produced a docket.

‘Sign this,’ he told Master Imus.

‘What is it?’

‘A waiver. Interrogator Endor and I are about to search your residence.’ Master Imus initialled the docket.

The two interrogators entered the hab. Master Imus followed them, and the old man shuffled in behind him.

The old man sniffed.

‘Sec vinegar,’ he said.

‘What?’ asked Master Imus.

‘Sec vinegar, and kayleaf.’

‘I use the vinegar to clean my fingers,’ said Master Imus. ‘It’s the only thing that gets the ink out.’

‘The only thing that gets the ink out,’ the old man repeated.

‘And I use kayleaf, in a paste, to regrind my quills.’

‘You don’t smoke it then?’ asked the old man.

‘Smoke it? Why?’

‘As a balm against rheumatic inflammation?’

‘No.’

‘Ah,’ the old man said. He shuffled forwards into the living room, his legs creaking like a servitor’s. He was terribly hunched, and his augmetic eyewear clicked as it hunted. ‘You should. It’s very medicinal. It would help your hip.’

‘My hip?’ asked Master Imus.

‘You walk with a slight counter rotation. Two centimetres short on each right step. You shuffle, sir. I presume it is rheumatism.’

Master Imus felt quite dismayed. These three men had intruded into his home. The officer was in his bedroom, overturning the mattress. The other man, Endor, was in the little side kitchen, sniffing the contents of various jars. No one new had been inside Master Imus’ hab for years. It felt like a violation.

‘Are you the inquisitor?’ Master Imus asked.

‘Me? Bless you, no,’ replied the old man. ‘Why would you think that?’

‘I just assumed...’

The old man shuffled over to the sideboard. ‘Fuse-fit sampwood. No maker’s mark. A vase.’

He picked the vase up.

‘Please be careful,’ Master Imus said.

The old man ignored him. He held the vase in his spindly fingers. ‘Sameterware. Third Dynasty.’ He looked inside it. ‘Oh, paper clips.’

The officer came back from the bedroom holding several books.

‘You have books,’ he said.

‘Is there something wrong with that?’ asked Master Imus.

‘You like poetry?’

‘The Early Imperials. The Tacits. Is that a crime?’

‘This is,’ said Endor. He walked in from the side kitchen with something in his hand. There was an ugly, almost triumphant grin on his face. Master Imus realised that what he first registered as handsome in the features of the officer’s companion was in fact a cruel arrogance. Interrogator Endor was accustomed to winning.

‘What is it?’ asked the officer.

‘Buried at the bottom of a jar of caffeine,’ Endor replied. He held out his hand. Six little pills lay in his palm.

‘Yellodes,’ he said.

‘Most perturbatory,’ said the old man.

‘They’re not mine,’ said Master Imus.

Master Imus sat on the threadbare couch tugging at his robe.

‘They’re not mine. Not mine, not at all. I don’t use that sort of thing. I wouldn’t even know how to get that sort of thing.’

‘Zespair Street, or the dealers that frequent the depot,’ said the old man.

‘Be quiet, Aemos,’ said the officer. He stared down at Master Imus. ‘This is a bad turn of events for you. It compounds things.’

‘They’re not mine. How many times do I have to say it?’

‘They were in your kitchen,’ said Endor, who seemed to be relishing Master Imus’ discomfort.

‘I didn’t put them there.’

‘Oh, so someone just came in and hid them in your caffiene, did they?’

‘That must be it. I can think of no other explanation.’

‘I’ve had enough. Let’s process him.’

‘Slow down, Titus,’ said the officer.

‘He’s up to his ears in it.’

‘Slow down, I said.’

‘I had plans for tonight,’ Titus Endor scowled.

‘Fantastic for you. Give me the tablets.’

Endor tipped the yellodes into the officer’s hand. The officer sat down on the couch next to Master Imus.

‘Get lost,’ he told his companions. Endor went out onto the landing to smoke a lho-stick. The old man shuffled away to examine the books in the bedroom.

‘I’ll be frank. This is going badly for you, sir,’ the officer explained to Master Imus.

‘I realise that.’

‘The matter of the accounts is the main thing. But the yellodes. They complicate the matter.’

‘I understand.’

‘They are a prohibited substance. That’s the first thing. The second thing is, they’re yellodes.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ said Master Imus.

‘This isn’t the first time I’ve inspected an individual’s hab and found evidence of drug use. Obscura, gladstones, that sort of business. But yellodes... They’re mind expanders. We typically find them in circumstances connected to cult activity.’

‘Cult?’

‘We often find them used in association with prohibited texts and deviant knowledge. A man who has the Number of Ruin might use yellodes to help him fathom it and master its use.’

Master Imus put his head in his hands. ‘They’re not mine.’

‘Is the Ur-Saker yours?’

‘The what?’

‘I found it between the Frobisher and the early Tacits in your bedroom.’

‘I don’t know what an Ur-Saker is. I don’t know its significance.’

‘It’s a proscribed text. It defines the methodological use of psychotropic drugs in gnostic enlightenment. So that was just placed there too, was it? Someone just put it there?’

‘They must have done!’

The officer sighed. ‘Master Imus, you brought a matter to our attention, a serious matter. The numbers you showed me in the ledger are quite

pernicious.'

'And I came of my own volition! Remember that!'

'I do, and that leaves me with two possibilities. You are a practising heretic with a pathological desire to be caught and condemned.'

'Or?'

'Or, Master Imus, you have been set up to take the fall for someone. There's one last thing I would like to do. It's necessary, for my work.'

'What is it, sir?' asked Master Imus.

The officer turned to look at him. His face was no longer human. It was a snout of rancid, gnashing teeth, spatulate and broad, with sharp edges. The snout opened, drooling spit, and seemed about to bite Master Imus' face clean off. Master Johan Imus smelled the pit-stink of the warp, and the shadows of dark places where no human ever willingly walked. He saw a monstrous horror lunging at him, pallid tentacles whipping up out of the distended throat. He cried out in fear and wet himself.

'I'm sorry I had to do that, Master Imus,' said the officer, wiping his mouth.

Titus Endor came in from the stairhead. 'Throne, Gregor. I felt that.'

'Sorry. Would you and Aemos please stay here and tidy the place? And help Master Imus to get cleaned up?'

'I had plans for tonight,' replied Endor.

'And now I have plans of my own,' said the officer.

Titus Endor stayed until midnight, and then made some vague excuse and left. The old man remained with Master Imus until dawn. They played regicide, and talked of antiques.

The officer returned at first light.

'The matter is settled,' he said. 'Thank you for your cooperation.'

When Master Imus went to work the next day, he found that Slocha and Daviov et Cie had been closed down. *With immediate effect and until further notice*, the seal on the door said.

Most of the staff had gathered in the street, bewildered and despondent.

'Master Slocha was shot,' muttered one of the underkeepers.

'He was shot last night by the Inquisition,' another confirmed.

'Oh dear!' said Master Imus.

Three days later, the officer called on Master Imus at his hab.

'Won't you sit down, sir?' invited Master Imus.

‘I’ve come to tell you that you’ve been formally cleared of all charges,’ the officer said.

‘Even my transgression?’

‘Even that.’

‘I’m very relieved,’ said Master Imus.

‘Your employer was conducting bad business, heretical business, in fact. He was engaged in the importation of illicit texts under the cover of the auction house’s primary dealings. We’d been after him for a year. We had no proof of his activities.’

‘I see.’

‘Your employer knew we were on to him, of course. He set you up to act as a distraction. He wanted us to concentrate on you instead of him. And we would have, if you hadn’t been so honest as to bring the matter to our attention.’

‘Did you kill Master Slocha?’ asked Johan Imus.

‘I’m afraid I did.’ The officer rose. ‘Well, I must be on my way.’

‘What happens now?’ asked Master Imus.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have no job to go to. The auction house is finished. What will become of me?’

‘I’m sorry, sir. That’s not my problem.’

The officer turned to leave.

‘I think I might be allowed to ask one question, in all fairness,’ said Master Imus.

‘Ask it.’

‘Why was it necessary?’

‘Why was what necessary?’ asked the officer.

‘Why was it necessary to scare me?’

‘Fear simplifies the mind, Master Imus. It is so strong and pure, it quite empties the head and removes all barriers and falsehoods. I scared you so I could read the truth inside you, the honest part of you that you could not dissemble. I’m sorry about that.’

‘You’re a psyker, then?’ Master Imus asked.

+Yes.+

‘Ah. I see. If you can read into the future, tell me... I have no job, and no references. I am too old and set in my ways to retrain. I have no means of support. I came forward of my own free volition, helped you hunt out a

heretic and proved my innocence, and I am left the poorer for it. What do I do now?’

+I’m a mind-reader, not a clairvoyant. +

‘Right. Thank you for your candour anyway.’

‘Goodbye, Master Imus.’

Interrogator Eisenhower closed the door behind him.

Master Imus sat on the threadbare couch. From the floor below, he could hear a baby crying. He could hear the knock of the landlord, going from hab to hab for the week’s rent. Master Imus’ rent dues were in the sideboard drawer. This week’s, and the next’s, but nothing more.

Master Imus was glad he had come forward, and glad he had spoken out. Duty was duty, after all. He tried to inflate some sense of civic pride in his heart.

But he wished, more than anything, he had just kept himself to himself.

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I crossed over into Jared County via the pass at Kulbrech. Air links were down, because of the Cackle, so a reluctant motorised unit of the local militia conveyed me from the capital as far as Kulbrech Town, and then only because the Jared Commissioner had been so insistent. This was – oh – 223.M41, and I was only just out on my own.

Even then, at the very dawn of my career, I was treated with a mixture of fear and suspicion. The rosette, or the title ‘inquisitor’, or a combination of both, fairly focused the minds of those who met me. This attitude bores me these days. Back then, it gave me a sort of vulgar sensation of power.

Inquisitor Flammel had been killed six months before in a miserable warp transit accident, and I had been posted as a locum to cover his circuit, which was the fief worlds of the Grand Banks in the coreward reaches of the Helican sub. Circuit work is a drudge, and one acts, in the main, as an itinerant magistrate, travelling from planetary capital to planetary capital, reviewing flotsam cases gathered by the local authorities. Most are trivial and hardly ordo business, scares conjured up by superstition and petty disputation, though I had spent eight weeks on New Bylar working through a caseload that eventually exposed a traffic in low-grade, unsanctioned psykers.

From New Bylar, I went to Ignix, the smallest and most peripheral of the fief colonies, a place locally regarded as the back end of all creation.

Ignix did not disappoint. Small, wet and whorled with ravines and meandering trenches created by an eternity of rainfall eroding its way down into the frothing seas, the planet is administratively divided into counties, each one millions of square kilometres.

Its capital is called Foothold, for it was there the first settlers made planetfall. They were miners, mineral extraction being the only profitable occupation a man can find on Ignix. Not long into their habitation, the

miners of Ignix specialised and became wet miners, panning and sifting the planet's thousand thousand fast waterways, many of them temporary run-offs that surge one day and are gone the next, for precious ores.

Wet mining fortunes had built Foothold into a decent-sized but drab town. All the worthwhile minerals had been shipped off-world in return for hard cash, and the place had been constructed from the residue. The buildings were stained and grim, many of them fabricated from locally cast rockcrete or a type of melta-formed pumice brick. I was put up in an airless residentiary, and went to the courthouse every day to review the pending cases. None of them deserved my attention, or even the rubber stamp of the ordos.

I had been there four days when the Cackle began. The name is a local one, a more appropriate description would be seasonal electrocorporeal storms. A by-product of Ignix's orbital variations and the virile behaviour of the star it circles, the storms visit each yearly cycle and blanket the northern hemisphere with a steady, florid electromagnetic display. The sky lights up. Corposant nests on rooftops and masts. Vox-links suffer. There is a continuous sound in the air, like a dry, evil chuckle, hence the name.

Some years it's mild, others it's bad. 223 was a bad year.

The Cackle was so fierce, it prevented any and all passage by air, including shuttle links from the lift harbour to starships at high anchor. Transfers on and off Ignix were suspended, and I was stuck for the duration, which turned out to be three weeks.

There was some novelty to be enjoyed at first. The flickering lights in the sky, day and night, were quite sublime, and produced certain hues that I swear I have never encountered since.

But the constant dirty chuckle became onerous and tormenting, as did the rancid, metallic sweat the charged air drew out of me. It was fuggy and close, and I quickly wearied of getting shocks from every damn metallic object I touched or used. I came to realise why the late Flammel had made Ignix a low priority on his circuit.

With the cases done with, there was little to do but wait for the Cackle to subside. I read, and studied, and struck up passing friendships with several similarly stranded travellers living in the residentiary, merchants mostly. Perhaps *friendships* is too strong a word: I knew them well enough to share a drink or a conversation or a game of regicide with, but nothing more. They understood what I was, and it made them nervous around me. For the

first time in my career, that vulgar sensation of power began to feel like a burden.

Towards the end of the first week of enforced occupation, a message arrived from the commissioner of Jared County. Due to the vox-out, it was brought by a biker who had run the flooding levees and wash plains of the county limits overnight. I can only assume the commissioner had paid the man well, for he was in a poor state by the time he arrived. The Foothold administrator, an old fellow called Wagneer, brought the message slip to me and waited while I read it.

‘He seems most insistent, this commissioner,’ I remarked.

‘Mal Zelwyn? He’s a good sort, very dutiful. He knew you were in town on circuit duties, and evidently hopes you might oblige him.’

I held the slip up.

‘Do you think this is genuine, administrator?’ I asked.

Wagneer shrugged his sloping shoulders. ‘Sounds like a hot one to me, but what do I know? I don’t have rosette training.’

Zelwyn, the commissioner of Jared County, had reported a pair of killings in his township, the unimaginatively named Jared County Town. He suspected cult activity, and requested an assessment by the circuit inquisitor. I would have dismissed it except for two facts. One, I had nothing better to do, and two, Zelwyn had written:

The victims suffered deep, random cuts and slashes to the body, having been slain by a crushing head wound. Each victim was missing its left ear.

‘How do I get there? Can you scare up a transport for me?’ I asked.

Wagneer laughed at the idea. ‘In this? All right, I’ll see what I can do.’

The local militia took me overland to the pass in a Centaur, hooded against the rain and bulked out with yellow swim-bladders to allow for the fording of flash floods. The crew was not at all happy about the outing, but bit their tongues because of what and who I was. After twelve hours grinding along mud tracks and waterlogged gulches, they got me through the pass, over the iron bridge, and into Kulbrech Town.

As we crossed the old, rusting bridge, I watched the corposant crackle and dance across the posts and stanchions.

In Kulbrech Town, an odious shanty backwater, transit was arranged to carry me on the next leg of my journey. The Centaur turned back to Foothold. I went on in a cargo-8 that had seen better days.

‘There’s been killing, you know?’ the driver mentioned, conversationally.

‘I had heard something to that effect.’

The driver nodded. Tiny threads of static were playing across his knuckles as he nudged the wheel.

‘Four dead,’ he said.

I can honestly say that I quite admired Jared Commissioner Maldar Zelwyn. What he lacked in almost everything he made up for in sheer optimism. He showed me around Jared County Town personally, and made it clear he was tremendously proud of it.

The town straddled twelve river threads, and it seemed to be all bridges and decking and cantilevered platforms. Habs stacked up high above the steep, rain-river chutes. Water throbbed and rattled and chugged down the channels through the town on its journey from the hills to the sea. As he drove me across the New Bridge, Zelwyn proudly explained how he had seen to its construction five years earlier, for the benefit of the community. It was a large metal structure connecting the Commercia quarter to the merchantman residences, and was evidently a boon to working practices. Before the bridge, the merchants had been obliged to take taxi boats from their homes to the Commercia every day. The river it crossed was one of the largest and most powerful bisecting Jared County Town, and the New Bridge was equipped with elevating sections so it could lift to admit the passage of trade ships and other water traffic coming inshore from the coast to the warehouse docks. It was an impressive piece of engineering, lit up, as we rode across it, by the unending light-show of the Cackle. Zelwyn clearly worked hard to support and improve his community, at the back end of all creation though it was.

We drew up on the glistening wharfs of the Commercia, and got out of the bulky land car. Zelwyn was a stocky man in his late forties with thinning hair and a heavy, bushy moustache. He took a data-slate out of his overcoat pocket.

‘All the victims were discovered in the Commercia district,’ he told me. ‘Here’s a plan of the locations. It seems arbitrary to me.’

I agreed, but I didn’t say so. ‘Is there crime scene data? Forensic material?’

‘I’m having it processed for you,’ he replied.

‘And you’ve got four now?’

‘Two more since I sent my message,’ he confirmed.

‘Is there a pattern?’

‘Apart from the way they were killed?’ he asked, and shook his head. ‘There’s no connection between the victims, except for the area they worked in – a trolley pusher, a warehouseman, a junior mercantile clerk, and a whore. We haven’t been able to connect any variables. As far as we know, they didn’t know each other.’

‘But you have a theory?’ I asked him.

He nodded. ‘The killer lives somewhere in the Commercial.’

‘Because?’

‘Each killing took place at a time when the New Bridge was raised. There was no crossing to the merchant district. To me, that says it must be local.’

I nodded. ‘But just a regular killer, surely? Not an ordo matter?’

‘We’ve had our share of murders over the years, inquisitor,’ Zelwyn replied. ‘My office handles the cases. But this... the random mutilation, the missing ears—’

‘What do you think that signifies?’ I asked.

‘Trophy taking?’ he suggested. ‘Cults do like to take trophies, I understand. Ritual, I suppose. It smacks of ritual.’

‘I reckon it might.’

‘Yeah, I thought so,’ said Zelwyn.

‘Why?’

‘You wouldn’t be here otherwise.’

The Cackle grew more fierce as night pushed in. When we left the Commercial, rain was beginning to fall, and sirens hooted, warning that the New Bridge was about to raise its hydraulic spans. The river was at flood tide.

I reviewed the victims in the frosty twinkle of the town morgue. Preservation methods in Jared County were not ordo standard. The cadavers had been dumped in bulk freezer units, and came out on their gurneys caked in frost, their vulnerable tissues blackened and cold-burned.

‘Sorry,’ said Zelwyn, watching me work. ‘I wish... our facilities could be better.’

‘Forget about it,’ I replied.

I used probes and skewers on the frigid bodies, sampling and measuring. The hacking wounds, some so deep they looked like claw marks, were

especially ugly. They smiled like happily parted lips, their mouths full to the brim with frozen black ice.

‘Cult work, then?’ he asked, after a few minutes. ‘Have I got a cult here I need to deal with?’

‘No, a hunter,’ I replied.

‘A hunter?’

I nodded.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Trophy taking is a hunter’s quirk – an ear, a finger, a lock of hair.’

‘But that’s ritual, isn’t it?’ Zelwyn asked.

‘Hunters have rituals too,’ I said. He looked downcast.

‘Not a cult thing, then?’

‘You sound disappointed.’

The Jared commissioner managed a weak smile. ‘Of course not. It’s just that I’d hoped I was on the money. I wanted to impress you. If this is simply some nut-job serial, I’ve wasted your time, and I should have known better.’

‘Not to mention,’ I added, wickedly, ‘that if this had been cult work, I’d have dealt with it for you?’

Zelwyn shook his head.

‘I’m sorry to have cost you a journey, sir,’ he said.

I felt rather ashamed of my attitude. I put down the probe, wiped frosted blood off my gloved hand, and turned to face him. ‘Look, I’ve nothing better to do. Let me help you anyway.’

‘You’d do that?’ he asked, rather taken aback.

‘Of course. Why not?’

‘Because you’re... you know...’

‘An inquisitor? Inquisitors don’t like serial killings any more than commissioners do,’ I said. ‘I have certain skills, Commissioner Zelwyn. I think I can bring this animal down.’

He smiled. It was the warmest, most genuine thing I’d seen in years.

I was just trundling the last corpse back into its freezer when a militia officer came into the morgue and whispered something to Zelwyn.

He turned to look at me. I felt his pain. I mean, I actually felt it. The psyker talents that would later serve me and shape my career were still raw and unshaped in those days, but my empathetic function nevertheless resounded at his distress.

‘While we were busy here...’ he began.

‘Talk to me, Zelwyn.’

He took a deep breath. ‘While we were fussing around here, there’s been another death.’

‘Is the body still in situ?’

He nodded.

‘Let’s see it.’

We had to wait for five minutes while the New Bridge lowered its spans to let us cross into the Commercial district. Zelwyn let one of his militiamen drive us. The Jared commissioner’s hands were shaking too much to be trusted.

Corposant lit up the bridge. The sky made strange colours that twisted and turned. Rain fell. The river below us rushed along, rich in sediment, towards the distant sea.

Lana Howey had worked the wharf for twelve years, and was a regular face at the drink-stops and taverns along the hem of the Commercial. She’d once been popular, a fast girl with good looks and impressive legs, but the work had taken its toll. In the months before her death, she had earned her income turning tricks for specialist customers, men who were more interested in what she was prepared to do rather than the way she looked.

Now she was dead.

Her body lay on the ground floor of a warehouse just off Commercial Main. It had been discovered by a night watchman. Slim, too slim, and wearing too much make-up, she lay naked and awkward under the over-bright portable lamps. The blood from the deep, slashing incisions had pooled under her in a slick. Her left ear was missing.

‘Same as the others,’ said Zelwyn, shuddering.

‘No,’ I said, crouching beside the body.

‘No?’

‘No, she’s still—’

I wanted to say alive, but that would have been wrong. She wasn’t alive anymore, but she was fresh, fresh compared to the freezer-burned residue Zelwyn had shown me earlier.

‘The hunter again?’ Zelwyn asked.

‘Looks like it. The ear, you notice?’

‘Why do you think it’s a hunter, Inquisitor Eisenhorn?’ Zelwyn asked.

‘The slash wounds,’ I replied. ‘You see? So deep. These are the kind of deep cuts that a hunter might administer to accelerate decomposition. A kill he doesn’t want, and which he wants to rot away quickly.’

Zelwyn pursed his lips. ‘What are you going to do now, sir?’

‘I’m going to ask you and your people to get out of this place. Withdraw to a sixty-metre perimeter.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t ask me that, commissioner.’

‘I want to stay,’ said Zelwyn.

‘On your own head, then. Get your people out.’

Later on in my career, I only ever undertook auto-seances when I had a properly qualified astrotelepath to assist me. Such acts can take a toll. Back then, I was young and headstrong, and full of my own energy and will. It’s a wonder I ever survived.

‘Bolt the door,’ I said to Zelwyn. He obliged. His men had gone. ‘Do what I say and don’t interrupt me,’ I added.

‘Right,’ he said.

He stood back, near the heavy warehouse door, watching. I knelt beside the hacked corpse and sighed.

Outside, the Cackle sputtered and pulsed.

‘Lana Howey?’ I called softly.

I felt Zelwyn open his mouth, to ask why in the name of the Throne I was talking to a dead body. I think it was about then that he finally woke up to what was going on. I sensed fear bubbling up inside him, along with a strong desire to be outside with his men after all. He’d never seen anything like this done before.

‘Lana Howey?’

The warehouse air took on the glossy, cold feel of hyper-reality. The light refined in clarity, and small details became impossibly sharp. The various odours of the place: soot, rockcrete, oil, sacking, thinners and the body itself, were suddenly more concentrated, more pronounced.

‘What am I doing here?’ asked the late Lana Howey.

I heard Commissioner Zelwyn groan. I felt his gnawing fear.

‘Lana Howey?’ I called.

‘Hello, mister. What’s your pleasure, then, sir?’

‘Lana, my name is Gregor.’

‘That’s a lovely name. Gregor. You’re a handsome one for sure, Gregor. What can I do for you tonight?’

‘Where are you, Lana Howey?’

‘I’m in the warehouse, with you, silly man. This is my place. Don’t you fret. It’s quiet here, discreet. You’re a regular, aren’t you? I know your face.’

‘You’ve never seen me before, Lana Howey. You’ll never see me again.’

‘I doubt that,’ she sniggered. Her chuckle was the scratchy glee of the Cackle. ‘I bet you’ll be back again for more, soon enough.’

‘I need you to focus, Lana Howey,’ I said.

‘Focus? What? Why do you keep using my name, my whole name, like that? Is that your thing, mister?’

+Lana?+

I felt Zelwyn fighting back an urge to throw open the door bolts and run. I really hadn’t wanted him to be here in the first place. All he could see was me kneeling beside the body. He could not see what I could see.

An after-image of the victim had appeared to me. She was wearing a cheap, revealing dress and had taken a seat on a nearby freight trunk, one leg crossed over the other. The raised foot was swinging impatiently.

+Lana? Can you hear me?+

‘How do you know my name, mister?’ the image asked, watching me.

+Administratum files. Lana, who was it?+

‘Who was it that what? Come on, I’ve got punters waiting. What are you on about?’

+Lana. Please let me see. Who did this to you?+

‘Who did what to me? Look, I haven’t got all night,’ she breathed. ‘Show me some money, mister.’

I reached into my pocket and produced three crowns. The air was very cold. My breath was steaming, and so were the open wounds on the corpse in front of me. On the trunk, image Lana swung her leg.

‘That’ll do it,’ she said. ‘What do you want? Full service, all the stuff?’ She stood up abruptly and reached down to pull her dress off over her head. It was only then that she seemed to notice the body on the floor.

The image stared down at it for a long time, her hands frozen in the act of bunching up her dress to drag it over and off. When she looked at me again, her eye make-up was blotted and running.

‘When?’ she asked.

+Not long ago.+

‘Oh, Throne. What did I ever do to deserve that?’

+Nothing. Lana, I want to know who it was. Will you show me?+

She showed me.

She showed me, her voice growing steadily quieter and quieter, and when she was done, she faded altogether without any protest, casting me one last, hurt look with her make-up-stained eyes.

I took off my storm coat and laid it over the corpse.

Outside, dawn was no more than an hour away. The rain had eased off and the Cackle had dropped in intensity. Zelwyn stood by the waiting militia transports, taking repeated draws from an old hip flask. When I walked up, he offered it to me. I took a big swallow.

‘Are you—?’ he began

‘I need a moment.’ The work had drained me, not so much sapping my will as abrading my emotions.

‘Can the details move in, at least?’ he asked.

I nodded. Several militia officers and two coroners with a stretcher went into the warehouse at Zelwyn’s nod. After a few minutes, someone brought me my coat.

I gestured to Zelwyn and walked away in the direction of the New Bridge.

‘It’s a good thing I stayed,’ I told him. ‘This turns out to be an ordo matter after all.’

‘A cult?’

‘No, and not a hunter either... At least it could be either of those things, but that’s not what makes it an ordo matter. We’re dealing with a regia occulta.’

‘*Hidden way*,’ he translated. Zelwyn was no fool, he had High Gothic.

‘That’s the literal translation. In the Ordo Malleus, it has a more specific meaning.’

‘Go on.’

‘A regia occulta is a pathway... A tunnel or portal, if you like, that links our reality with that of the warp.’

‘Is it a deliberate thing?’ he asked.

‘Perhaps. Cults and heretics do sometimes open them deliberately. But it could be a natural occurrence. Most are. The fabric of space is thin in

places, you see, and sometimes there are leaks.'

He shook his head and a sad smile appeared under his heavy moustache. 'I don't actually know much about the warp, sir,' he said.

'Nor should you, commissioner. It's forbidden lore. I'm just telling you what you need to know. There is a regia occulta in Jared County Town, and it's right here.'

We were standing at the Commercia end of the New Bridge.

It took Zelwyn just a few minutes to have the bridge and its feeder roads closed off and barricaded by the militia. Another hour, and it would have been teeming with traffic heading in for work.

'Can you tell me why this only happens when the bridge is up?' Zelwyn asked. 'I mean, surely that would block a crossing?'

'I'll do better than tell you,' I said. 'I'll show you.'

We took up a position at the Commercia end; me, Zelwyn and four men from the militia armed with powerful autorifles. At my nod, the commissioner signalled to the bridge machine room on the far bank, and the operators engaged the hydraulics. Ponderously, with a dull squeal like gates opening, the massive spans began to lift.

The Cackle fluoresced in the dawn sky over our heads. Blue ropes of fizzling corposant writhed and trickled like snakes around the iron finials of the bridge towers, and traced their way along the rising edges of the gigantic metal spans.

The hydraulics cut out when the spans were at a standard lifted position, at about forty degrees from the horizontal. We waited, looking up the steep metal slope of the span facing us. Below us, out of sight, the fast-running river gurgled and hissed.

We waited for ten minutes. Corposant gathered in increasingly heavy ribbons around the raised tips of the bridge span, as if attracted there in concentration, like lightning drawn to a conductor.

There was a dry electric crack, and we smelled ozone. One of the militiamen pointed. A whip of corposant had flicked out from the tip of one span and connected with the tip of the other, like a squiggle of electrostatic voltage crackling between two insulated orbs. It remained there, jerking and sizzling, like a bright, twisting rope tying the two halves of the raised bridge together. This feature had not been evident in the patchy disposition Lana Howey had shown me, but I suddenly felt I had discerned the key mechanism of the infernal regia occulta.

One of the militiamen started to say something, but I already knew ‘it’ was happening. The hairs on my neck were raised. I felt something akin to a ball of ice in my stomach, and a searing pain behind my eyes.

The killer came into view. He simply manifested out of nowhere, as if the air had parted like a curtain and let him through. He appeared high up on the span ahead of us, and began to plod down the steep slope. He did not see us at first. We heard his feet slapping heavily on the metal roadway.

Though humanoid, he wasn’t human. I was the largest man in our party, and he was twice my mass and half my height again. He came wrapped in a heavy, ragged cloak of animal skins with a hood drawn up. His shoulders were very broad.

The pain behind my eyes was getting worse by the second. I could barely focus.

‘Kill it,’ I said.

We opened fire: four military-grade autorifles, firing reinforced rounds with fifty per cent more grain in them than standard, Zelwyn’s lasgun, and my Tronsvasse assault pistol. The noise was stunning, and the muzzle flash a strobing flutter. The killer was dead in just a few seconds. Our firepower tore him apart and shredded his foul cloak, though he possessed such astonishing strength that he actually managed to walk into our fusillade a step or two, trying to shrug it off, before it overcame him.

He fell heavily, and rolled down the slope.

‘He’ was a mature ork warrior. Released by his spasming paws, a huge cleaver and a large metal cudgel lay on the roadway beside him. We approached slowly. Greenskins are notoriously hard to kill, and though we had blown this one wide open, I fired three more rounds into its skull to be on the safe side. Ichor, almost black in the dawn light, ran down the slope. The mangled corpse showed signs of body paint, tribal markings and lots of crude piercings and bangles. Fresh human ears were strung around its throat on a wire.

‘A greenskin?’ Zelwyn murmured. ‘But this isn’t green space. There haven’t been any orks in this sub for generations.’

‘It didn’t come from this sub,’ I said. I was finding it hard to speak or concentrate. The pain behind my eyes was even worse than before. It felt like a hot wire. ‘It came from whatever random site this regia occulta connects to. This beast went hunting one day, and ended up here. We’ll never know, I fancy, where... where...’

‘Inquisitor? Inquisitor Eisenhorn?’ I heard Zelwyn say. I felt his hand catch my arm. The pain behind my eyes had turned into full-blown psyk agony. I could barely stand, let alone speak.

And I really wanted to speak. I needed to. I needed to yell out, ‘It’s not over!’

The regia occulta was still open. While we had been standing there, gawping at the ork’s cadaver, a second one had walked in through the hidden way.

For such a massive thing, it moved very fast. I moved like lead, transfixed by the pain the seething warp gate was lancing into my receptive mind.

I heard a feral roar, and smelled a foul animal scent. I fell, shoved aside, I think. An autorifle fired.

The ork slew the first militiaman as he landed among us, splitting the fellow straight through the crown with his jagged cleaver. The man collapsed under the force of the blow, his sectioned skull spilling open as the blade jerked back out, his heels drumming the ground. The ork caught another man by the throat, yanked him off his feet, and bit away his face.

It is awful to reflect that this unfortunate lived for at least another ten minutes.

The ork broke the back of a third militiaman with a stinging cudgel blow, before making off in great bounding leaps towards the unlit buildings of the Commercia. Zelwyn and the sole remaining militiaman fired after it. The man with the broken back lay on the ground, screaming.

‘Eisenhorn?’ Zelwyn yelled.

+Lower. The. Bridge.+

I didn’t want to use my will on the poor fellow, but I had no choice. My mouth wouldn’t work. Zelwyn wet himself as my mind intruded upon his. To his credit, he rallied and signalled the machine room.

The New Bridge slowly rattled and clanked back into place. The corposant charge between the spans shorted out and vanished as the opposite ends touched.

My mind cleared at once, the pain draining back. The regia occulta was shut.

Blood had streamed out of my nose and soaked the front of my jacket. I got up and ran towards the warehouses. The ork had vanished from sight. I had to find it, before it found anyone else. A greenskin is dangerous

enough. This one was enraged, possibly wounded, and knew it was cut off and pursued by its mortal foe, man.

Zelwyn ran after me. The remaining militiaman stayed put, too shocked to move, his rifle limp in his white-knuckled hands.

‘Get back, Zelwyn!’ I shouted. ‘Gather your militia in full force.’

‘Like hell!’ he yelled back. He shouted over at the units waiting behind the barricades, and they moved forwards after us. We entered the most likely venue, a warehouse stacked with mineral hoppers. Glow globes hung from the rafters, but not all of them worked. Frail daybreak glimmered through the rooflights.

‘In here?’ Zelwyn whispered, panting.

I held up my hand for hush. The place was quiet, except for the mocking chuckle of the Cackle. I tried to reach out with my mind, but I was drained, and no human psyker can read the greenskin mind. They are blunt to us. I took a deep breath instead, and smelled the air: mineral stink, wet rocks, and a hint, just a hint, of animal odour.

We edged forwards. I saw dark, wet spots on the rockcrete floor, leading between the piled hoppers. Unless someone had recently carried a leaky promethium drum through the place, Zelwyn had managed to wound the creature right enough. I touched one of the spots. It oozed warmth.

‘It’s here,’ I whispered.

Zelwyn already knew that. It had come out of the shadows, nightmarishly silent for something so big, and seized him by the throat. I turned slowly.

The ork had pulled the Jared commissioner in against its massive chest like a mother hugging a baby to its breast. Its left paw entirely encircled the man’s neck. Zelwyn’s eyes were wide, and his face was pale. The ork raised its right hand and gently rested the massive cleaver on Zelwyn’s scalp. Tiny trickles of blood ran down Zelwyn’s face.

The bull-ork’s yellow eyes, deep in the brow-ridged sockets, glared at me. Its heavy, flaccid lips wrinkled and twitched. Its tongue, huge and greasy, worked behind its rotting peg teeth. Each one of those teeth was the size of my palm.

The ork was not a bright beast, but it was smart enough, instinctive enough, to recognise its predicament. It was bargaining with me, a life for a life. This much I knew. Otherwise, Zelwyn would have been dead already.

I thought about taking a shot, but dared not risk hitting the commissioner. I was too spent, and it was no time to try my aim. Besides, greenskins are

notoriously hard to kill. Even if I hit it, one round from a Tronsvasse would not do the trick.

All I had was my will. I couldn't impel the ork in any way, but Zelwyn was a different matter.

Without hesitation, I reached into the commissioner's panicking mind. He was still clutching his laspistol, dangling at his side. I squeezed his finger for him. The shot blew clean through the arch of the ork's slabby right foot.

The greenskin convulsed in pain, but I already had a grip on Zelwyn's motor function, and I threw him forwards. I felt his astonishment as his body acted without his permission. He flew out of the ork's briefly weakened grip so fast and hard, he careered forwards and bounced face-first off the hopper to my right.

I was already firing, my weapon braced in a two-handed grip. I emptied the assault pistol's clip into the greenskin's chest, filling the air with drenching black mist and driving the monster into the stack of mineral hoppers behind it. It smashed heavily into the metal siding, but remained on its feet.

I ejected the dead clip, and let it drop and clatter to the floor as I snapped home a reload from my coat pocket. I tore off the second clip in one go, firing into the ork's face and neck. The back of its vast skull banged repeatedly against the hopper behind it. Spray-patterns of ichor splashed out across the hopper's side.

It swayed, then took another step towards me.

'Oh, for Throne's sake,' I hissed, 'just die.'

It died. The stack of hoppers, unsettled by the repeated impacts, creaked and toppled, crushing the ork in an avalanche of rock ore, clinker and iron crates. The noise was deafening. I shielded my face. Dust billowed up, and slowly settled.

I helped the Jared commissioner to his feet. He was quaking badly. Both of us were coated with a film of rock dust. He looked at the mangled heap of wreckage, where dark, clotted ichor seeped out from under the heaps of spoil.

'Holy shit,' he murmured.

There was no way, or no way in the understanding of the ordos, anyway, to close a regia occulta. I made it quite clear to Zelwyn that the New Bridge should never, ever be raised again, for it was that very raising, during the

Cackle, that produced the unique combination of effects necessary for the regia occulta to function. He needed no persuasion. The day before I left Jared County Town, he had the machine room dismantled and the heavy gauge hydraulics uncoupled. I understand, though I cannot confirm the fact, that the New Bridge was swept away in a freak flood tide some years later. It was never replaced. The regia occulta never reoccurred in Jared County Town.

Commissioner Zelwyn, who went on to serve his community for six and a half decades, kept one of the ork cleavers on his office wall, and enjoyed telling visitors that the dried blood on its points was his.

The morning I left, he came to see me off.

‘I hope I never see you again, inquisitor,’ he said, shaking my hand.

‘I hope so too, commissioner.’

He paused. ‘I meant that in a good way,’ he added.

‘So did I,’ I said.

I crossed over into Foothold County via the pass at Kulbrech. The reluctant motorised unit of the local militia was there to meet me, the engine of the Centaur idling. They weren’t glad to see me, but I was glad to see them. The Cackle was dying away, and I would soon be gone from Ignix.

The Cackle was dying away, but it insisted on having the last laugh. Many years later, at the end of my life, the mocking elements of Ignix would return to haunt me. But this was – oh – 223.M41, and I was only just out on my own.

MISSING IN ACTION

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I lost my left hand on Sameter. This is how it occurred. On the thirteenth day of Sagittar (local calendar), three days before the solstice, in the mid-rise district of the city of Urbitane, an itinerant evangelist called Lazlo Mombril was found shuffling aimlessly around the flat roof of a disused tannery, lacking his eyes, his tongue, his nose and both of his hands.

Urbitane is the second city of Sameter, a declining agro-chemical planet in the Helican subsector, and it is no stranger to crimes of cruelty and spite brought on by the vicissitudes of neglect and social deprivation afflicting its tightly packed population. This act of barbarity stood out for two reasons. First, it was no hot-blooded assault or alcohol-fuelled manslaughter, but a deliberate and systematic act of brutal, almost ritual mutilation.

Second, it was the fourth such crime discovered that month.

I had been on Sameter for just three weeks, investigating the links between a bonded trade federation and a secessionist movement on Hesperus at the request of Lord Inquisitor Rorken. The links proved to be nothing – Urbitane's economic slump had forced the federation to chase unwise business with unscrupulous shipmasters, and the real meat of the case lay on Hesperus – but I believe this was the lord inquisitor's way of gently easing me back into active duties following the long and arduous affair of the Necroteuch.

By the Imperial calendar it was 241.M41, late in that year. I had just finished several self-imposed months of recuperation, meditation and study on Thracian Primaris. The eyes of the daemonhost Cherubael still woke me some nights, and I wore permanent scars from torture at the hands of the sadist Gorgone Locke. His strousine neural scourge had damaged my nervous system and paralysed my face. I would not smile again for the rest of my life. But the battle wounds sustained on KCX-1288 and 56-Izar had healed, and I was itching to renew my work.

This idle task on Sameter had suited me, so I had taken it and closed the dossier after a swift and efficient investigation. But latterly, as I prepared to leave, officials of the Munitorum unexpectedly requested an audience.

I was staying with my associates in a suite of rooms in the Urbitane Excelsior, a shabby but well-appointed establishment in the high-rise district of the city. Through soot-stained, armoured roundels of glass twenty metres across, the suite looked out over the filthy grey towers of the city to the brackish waters of the polluted bay twenty kilometres away. Ornithopters and biplanes buzzed between the massive city structures, and the running lights of freighters and orbitals glowed in the smog as they swung down towards the landing port. Out on the isthmus, through a haze of yellow, stagnant air, promethium refineries belched brown smoke into the perpetual twilight.

‘They’re here,’ said Bequin, entering the suite’s lounge from the outer lobby. She had dressed in a demure gown of blue damask and a silk pashmeena, perfectly in keeping with my instruction that we should present a muted but powerful image.

I myself was clad in a suit of soft black linen with a waistcoat of grey velvet and a hip-length black leather storm coat.

‘Do you need me for this?’ asked Midas Betancore, my pilot and confidant.

I shook my head. ‘I don’t intend to be delayed here. I just have to be polite. Go on to the landing port and make sure the gun-cutter’s readied for departure.’

He nodded and left. Bequin showed the visitors in.

I had felt it necessary to be polite, because Eskeen Hansaard, Urbitane’s Minister of Security, had come to see me himself. He was a massive man in a double-breasted brown tunic, his big frame offset oddly by his finely featured, boyish face. He was escorted by two bodyguards in grey, armour-ribbed uniforms, and a short but handsome, black-haired woman in a dark blue bodyglove.

I had made sure I was sitting in an armchair when Bequin showed them in so I could rise in a measured, respectful way. I wanted them to be in no doubt who was really in charge here.

‘Minister Hansaard,’ I said, shaking his hand. ‘I am Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn of the Ordo Xenos. These are my associates Alizebeth Bequin,

Arbites Chastener Godwyn Fischig and savant Uber Aemos. How may I help you?’

‘I have no wish to waste your time, inquisitor,’ he said, apparently nervous in my presence. That was good, just as I had intended it. ‘A case has been brought to my attention that I believe is beyond the immediate purview of the city Arbites. Frankly, it smacks of warp corruption, and cries out for the attention of the Inquisition.’

He was direct. That impressed me. A ranking official of the Imperium, anxious to be seen to be doing the right thing. Nevertheless, I expected his business might be a mere nothing, like the affair of the trade federation, a local crime requiring only my nod of approval that it was fine for him to continue and close. Men like Hansaard are often over-careful, in my experience.

‘There have been four deaths in the city during the last month that we believe to be linked. I would appreciate your advice on them. They are connected by merit of the ritual mutilation involved.’

‘Show me,’ I said.

‘Captain?’ he responded.

Arbites Captain Hurlie Wrex was the handsome woman with the short black hair. She stepped forwards, nodded respectfully, and gave me a data-slate with the gold crest of the Adeptus Arbites on it.

‘I have prepared a digested summary of the facts,’ she said.

I began to speed-read the slate, already preparing the gentle knock-back I was expecting to give to his case. Then I stopped, slowed, read back.

I felt a curious mix of elation and frustration. Even from this cursorial glance, there was no doubt this case required the immediate attention of the Imperial Inquisition. I could feel my instincts stiffen and my appetites whetten, for the first time in months. In bothering me with this, Minister Hansaard was not being over-careful at all. At the same time, my heart sank with the realisation that my departure from this miserable city would be delayed.

All four victims had been blinded and had their noses, tongues and hands removed, at the very least.

The evangelist, Mombril, had been the only one found alive. He had died from his injuries eight minutes after arriving at Urbitane Mid-rise Sector Infirmary. It seemed to me likely that he had escaped his ritual tormentors somehow before they could finish their work.

The other three were a different story.

Poul Greven, a machinesmith; Luthar Hewall, a rug-maker; Idilane Fasple, a midwife.

Hewall had been found a week before by city sanitation servitors during routine maintenance to a soil stack in the mid-rise district. Someone had attempted to burn his remains and then flush them into the city's ancient waste system, but the human body is remarkably durable. The post-mortem could not prove his missing body parts had not simply succumbed to decay and been flushed away, but the damage to the ends of the forearm bones seemed to speak convincingly of a saw or chainblade.

When Idilane Fasple's body was recovered from a crawlspace under the roof of a mid-rise tenement hab, it threw more light on the extent of Hewall's injuries. Not only had Fasple been mutilated in the manner of the evangelist Mombril, but her brain, brainstem and heart had been excised. The injuries were hideous. One of the roof workers who discovered her had committed suicide. Her bloodless, almost desiccated body, dried out – smoked, if you will – by the tenement's heating vents, had been wrapped in a dark green cloth similar to the material of an Imperial Guard-issue bedroll, and stapled to the underside of the rafters with an industrial nail gun.

Cross-reference between her and Hewall convinced the Arbites that the rug-maker had very probably suffered the removal of his brain stem and heart too. Until that point, they had ascribed the identifiable lack of those soft organs to the almost toxic levels of organic decay in the liquescent filth of the soil stack.

Greven, actually the first victim found, had been dredged from the waters of the bay by a salvage ship. He had been presumed to be a suicide dismembered by the screws of a passing boat until Wrex's careful cross-checking had flagged up too many points of similarity.

Because of the peculiar circumstances of their various post-mortem locations, it was pathologically impossible to determine any exact date or time of death. But Wrex could be certain of a window. Greven had last been seen on the nineteenth of Aquiarae, three days before his body had been dredged up. Hewall had delivered a finished rug to a high-rise customer on the twenty-fourth, and had dined that same evening with friends at a charcute in mid-rise. Fasple had failed to report for work on the fifth of

Sagittar, although the night before she had seemed happy and looking forward to her next shift, according to friends.

‘I thought at first, a serial predator might be loose in mid-rise,’ said Wrex. ‘But the pattern of mutilation seems to me more extreme than that. This is not feral murder, or even psychopathic, post-slaying depravity. This is specific, purposeful ritual.’

‘How do you arrive at that?’ asked my colleague, Fischig. Fischig was a senior Arbites from Hubris, with plenty of experience in murder cases. Indeed, it was his fluency with procedure and familiarity with *modus operandi* that had convinced me to make him a part of my band. That, and his ferocious strength in a fight.

Wrex looked sidelong at him, as if he was questioning her ability. ‘Because of the nature of the dismemberment. Because of the way the remains were disposed of.’ She looked at me. ‘In my experience, inquisitor, a serial killer secretly wants to be found, and certainly wants to be known. He will display his kills with wanton openness, declaring his power over the community. He thrives on the terror and fear he generates. Great efforts were made to hide these bodies. That suggests to me the killer was far more interested in the deaths than in the reaction to the deaths.’

‘Well put, captain,’ I said. ‘That has been my experience too. Cult killings are often hidden so that the cult can continue its work without fear of discovery.’

‘Suggesting that there are other victims still to find...’ said Bequin casually, a chilling prophecy as it now seems to me.

‘Cult killings?’ said the minister. ‘I brought this to your attention because I feared as much, but do you really think—’

‘On Alphex, the warp-cult removed their victims’ hands and tongues because they were organs of communication,’ Aemos began. ‘On Brettaria, the brains were scooped out in order for the cult to ingest the spiritual matter – the *anima*, as you might say – of their prey. A number of other worlds have suffered cult predations where the eyes have been forfeit... Gulinglas, Pentari, Hesperus, Messina... Windows of the soul, you see. The Heretics of Saint Scarif, in fact, severed their ritual victims’ hands and then made them write out their last confessions using ink quills rammed into the stumps of—’

‘Enough information, Aemos,’ I said. The minister was looking pale. ‘These are clearly cult killings, sir,’ I said. ‘There is a noxious cell of Chaos

at liberty in your city. And I will find it.'

I went at once to the mid-rise district. Grevan, Hewall and Fasple had all been residents of that part of Urbitane, and Mombril, though a visitor to the metropolis, had been found there too. Aemos went to the Munitorium records spire in high-rise to search the local archives. I was particularly interested in historical cult activity on Sameter, and on date significance. Fischig, Bequin and Wrex accompanied me.

The genius loci of a place can often say much about the crimes committed therein. So far, my stay on Sameter had only introduced me to the cleaner, high-altitude regions of Urbitane's high-rise, up above the smog-cover.

Mid-rise was a dismal, wretched place of neglect and poverty. A tarry resin of pollution coated every surface, and acid rain poured down unremittingly. Raw-engined traffic crawled nose to tail down the poorly lit streets, and the very stone of the buildings seemed to be rotting. The smoggy darkness of mid-rise had a red, firelit quality, the backwash of the flares from giant gas processors. It reminded me of picture-slate engravings of the Inferno.

We stepped from Wrex's armoured speeder at the corner of Shearing Street and Pentecost. The captain pulled on her Arbites helmet and a quilted flak coat. I began to wish for a hat of my own, or a rebreather mask. The rain stank like urine. Every thirty seconds or so an express flashed past on the elevated trackway, shaking the street.

'In here,' Wrex called, and led us through a shutter off the thoroughfare into the dank hallway of a tenement hab. Everything was stained with centuries of grime. The heating had been set too high, perhaps to combat the murky wetness outside, but the result was simply an overwhelming humidity and a smell like the fur of a mangy canine.

This was Idilane Fasple's last resting place. She'd been found in the roof. 'Where did she live?' asked Fischig.

'Two streets away. She had a parlour on one of the old court-habs.'

'Hewall?'

'His hab is about a kilometre west. His remains were found five blocks east.'

I looked at the data-slate. The tannery where Mombril had been found was less than thirty minutes' walk from here, and Greven's home a short

tram ride. The only thing that broke the geographical focus of these lives and deaths was the fact that Greven had been dumped in the bay.

‘It hasn’t escaped my notice that they all inhabited a remarkably specific area,’ Wrex smiled.

‘I never thought it had. But “remarkably” is the word. It isn’t just the same quarter or district. It’s an intensely close network of streets, a neighbourhood.’

‘Suggesting?’ asked Bequin.

‘The killer or killers are local too,’ said Fischig.

‘Or someone from elsewhere has a particular hatred of this neighbourhood and comes into it to do his or her killing,’ said Wrex.

‘Like a hunting ground?’ noted Fischig.

I nodded. Both possibilities had merit.

‘Look around,’ I told Fischig and Bequin, well aware that Wrex’s officers had already been all over the building. But she said nothing. Our expert appraisal might turn up something different.

I found a small office at the end of the entrance hall. It was clearly the cubbyhole of the habitat’s superintendent. Sheaves of paper were pinned to the flakboard wall: rental dockets, maintenance rosters, notes of resident complaints. There was a box-tray of lost property, a partially disassembled mini-servitor in a tub of oil, a stale stink of cheap liquor. A faded ribbon-and-paper rosette from an Imperial shrine was pinned over the door with a regimental rank stud.

‘What you doing in here?’

I looked around. The superintendent was a middle-aged man in a dirty overall suit. Details. I always look for details. The gold signet ring with the wheatear symbol. The row of permanent metal sutures closing the scar on his scalp where the hair had never grown back. The prematurely weathered skin. The guarded look in his eyes.

I told him who I was, and he didn’t seem impressed. Then I asked him who he was and he said, ‘The super. What you doing in here?’

I use my will sparingly. The psychic gift sometimes closes as many doors as it opens. But there was something about this man. He needed a jolt.

‘What is your name?’ I asked, modulating my voice to carry the full weight of the psychic probe.

He rocked backwards, and his pupils dilated in surprise. ‘Quater Traves,’ he mumbled.

‘Did you know the midwife Fasples?’

‘I sin her around.’

‘To speak to?’

He shook his head. His eyes never left mine. ‘Did she have friends?’

He shrugged.

‘What about strangers? Anyone been hanging around the hab?’

His eyes narrowed. A sullen, mocking look, as if I hadn’t seen the streets outside.

‘Who has access to the roofspace where her body was found?’

‘Ain’t nobody bin up there. Not since the place bin built. Then the heating packs in, and the contractors has to break through the roof to get up there. They found her.’

‘There isn’t a hatch?’

‘Shutter. Locked, and no one has a key. Easier to go through the plasterboard.’

Outside, we sheltered from the rain under the elevated railway.

‘That’s what Traves told me too,’ Wrex confirmed. ‘No one had been into the roof for years until the contractors broke their way in.’

‘Someone had. Someone with the keys to the shutter. The killer.’

The soil stack where Hewall had been found was behind a row of commercial properties built into an ancient skin of scaffolding that cased the outside of a toolfitters’ workshop like a cobweb. There was what seemed to be a bar two stages up, where a neon sign flickered between an Imperial aquila and a fleur-de-lys. Fischig and Wrex continued up to the next scaffolding level to peer in through the stained windows of the habs there. Bequin and I went into the bar.

The light was grey inside. At a high bar, four or five drinkers sat on ratchet-stools and ignored us. The scent of obscura smoke was in the air.

There was a woman behind the counter who took exception to us from the moment we came in. She was in her forties, with a powerful, almost masculine build. Her vest was cut off at the armpits and her arms were as muscular as Fischig’s. There was a small tattoo of a skull and crossbones on her bicep. The skin of her face was weathered and coarse.

‘Help you?’ she asked, wiping the counter with a glass-cloth. As she did so I saw that her right arm, from the elbow down, was a prosthetic.

‘Information,’ I said.

She flicked her cloth at the row of bottles on the shelves behind her. 'Not a brand I know.'

'You know a man called Hewall?'

'No.'

'The guy they found in the waste pipes behind here.'

'Oh. Didn't know he had a name.'

Now I was closer, I could see the tattoo on her arm wasn't a skull and crossbones. It was a wheatear.

'We all have names. What's yours?'

'Omin Lund.'

'You live around here?'

'Live is too strong a word.' She turned away to serve someone else.

'Scary bitch,' said Bequin as we went outside. 'Everyone acts like they've got something to hide.'

'Everyone does, even if it's simply how much they hate this town.'

The heart had gone out of Urbitane, out of Sameter itself, about seventy years before. The mill-hives of Thracian Primaris eclipsed Sameter's production, and export profits fell away. In an effort to compete, the authorities freed the refineries to escalate production by stripping away the legal restrictions on atmospheric pollution levels. For hundreds of years, Urbitane had had problems controlling its smog and air-pollutants. For the last few decades, it hadn't bothered any more.

My vox-earplug chimed. It was Aemos. 'What have you found?'

'It's most perturbatory. Sameter has been clear of taint for a goodly while. The last Inquisitorial investigation was thirty-one years ago standard, and that wasn't here in Urbitane, but in Aquitane, the capital. A rogue psyker. The planet has its fair share of criminal activity, usually narcotics trafficking and the consequential mob-fighting. But nothing markedly heretical.'

'Nothing with similarities to the ritual methods?'

'No, and I've gone back two centuries.'

'What about the dates?'

'Sagittar thirteenth is just shy of the solstice, but I can't make any meaning out of that. The Purge of the Sarpetal Hives is usually commemorated by upswings of cult activity in the subsector, but that's six weeks away. The only other thing I can find is that this Sagittar fifth was the twenty-first anniversary of the Battle of Klodeshi Heights.'

‘I don’t know it.’

‘The sixth of seven full-scale engagements during the sixteen-month Imperial campaign on Surealis Six.’

‘Surealis... that’s in the next damn subsector! Aemos, every day of the year is the anniversary of an Imperial action somewhere. What connection are you making?’

‘The Ninth Sameter Infantry saw service in the war on Surealis.’

Fischig and Wrex had joined us from their prow around the upper stages of the scaffolding. Wrex was talking on her own vox-set.

She signed off and looked at me, rain drizzling off her visor.

‘They’ve found another one, inquisitor,’ she said.

It wasn’t one. It was three, and their discovery threw the affair wide open. An old warehouse in the mill zone, ten streets away from Fasple’s hab, had been damaged by fire two months before, and municipal work-crews had moved in to tear it down and reuse the lot as a site for cheap, prefab habitat blocks. They’d found the bodies behind the wall insulation in a mouldering section untouched by the fire. A woman and two men, systematically mutilated in the manner of the other victims.

But these were much older. I could tell that even at a glance.

I crunched across the debris littering the floorspace of the warehouse shell. Rain streamed in through the roof holes, illuminated as a blizzard of white specks by the cold blue beams of the Arbites’ floodlights shining into the place.

Arbites officers were all around, but they hadn’t touched the discovery itself.

Mummified and shrivelled, these foetally curled, pitiful husks had been in the wall a long time.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

Fischig leaned forwards for a closer look. ‘Adhesive tape, wrapped around them to hold them against the partition. Old. The gum’s decayed.’

‘That pattern on it. The silver flecks.’

‘I think it’s military-issue stuff. Matt-silver coating, you know the sort? The coating’s coming off with age.’

‘These bodies are different ages,’ I said.

‘I thought so too,’ said Fischig.

We had to wait six hours for a preliminary report from the district Examiner Medicae, but it confirmed our guess. All three bodies had been in the wall for at least eight years, and then for different lengths of time. Decompositional anomalies showed that one of the males had been in position for as much as twelve years, the other two added subsequently, at different occasions. No identifications had yet been made.

‘The warehouse was last used six years ago,’ Wrex told me.

‘I want a roster of workers employed there before it went out of business.’

Someone using the same m.o. and the same spools of adhesive tape had hidden bodies there over a period of years.

The disused tannery where poor Mombril had been found stood at the junction between Xerxes Street and a row of slum tenements known as the Pilings. It was a foetid place, with the stink of the lye and coroscutum used in the tanning process still pungent in the air. No amount of acid rain could wash that smell out.

There were no stairs. Fischig, Bequin and I climbed up to the roof via a metal fire-ladder.

‘How long does a man survive mutilated like that?’

‘From the severed wrists alone, he’d bleed out in twenty minutes, perhaps,’ Fischig estimated. ‘Clearly, if he had made an escape, he’d have the adrenaline of terror sustaining him a little.’

‘So when he was found up here, he can have been no more than twenty minutes from the scene of his brutalisation.’

We looked around. The wretched city looked back at us, close packed and dense. There were hundreds of possibilities. It might take days to search them all.

But we could narrow it down.

‘How did he get on the roof?’ I asked.

‘I was wondering that,’ said Fischig.

‘The ladder we came up by...’ Bequin trailed off as she realised her gaffe.

‘Without hands?’ Fischig smirked.

‘Or sight,’ I finished. ‘Perhaps he didn’t escape. Perhaps his abusers put him here.’

‘Or perhaps he fell,’ Bequin said, pointing.

The back of a tall warehouse overshadowed the tannery to the east. Ten metres up there were shattered windows.

‘If he was in there somewhere, fled blindly, and fell through onto this roof...’

‘Well reasoned, Alizebeth,’ I said.

The Arbites had done decent work, but not even Wrex had thought to consider this inconsistency.

We went round to the side entrance of the warehouse. The battered metal shutters were locked. A notice pasted to the wall told would-be intruders to stay out of the property of Hundlemas Agricultural Stowage.

I took out my multi-key, and disengaged the padlock. I saw Fischig had drawn his sidearm.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I had a feeling just then... like we were being watched.’

We went inside. The air was cold and still, and smelled of chemicals. Rows of storage vats filled with chemical fertilisers lined the echoing warehall.

The second floor was bare-boarded and hadn’t been used in years. Wire mesh had been stapled over a doorway to the next floor, and rainwater dripped down. Fischig pulled at the mesh. It was cosmetic only, and folded aside neatly.

Now I drew my autopistol too.

On the street side of the third floor, which was divided into smaller rooms, we found a chamber ten metres by ten, on the floor of which was spread a sheet of plastic, smeared with old blood and other organic deposits. There was a stink of fear.

‘This is where they did him,’ Fischig said with certainty.

‘No sign of cult markings or Chaos symbology,’ I mused.

‘Maybe not,’ said Bequin, crossing the room, being careful not to step on the smeared plastic sheet. For the sake of her shoes, not the crime scene, I was sure. ‘What’s this? Something was hung here.’

Two rusty hooks in the wall, scraped enough to show something had been hanging there recently. On the floor below was a curious cross drawn in yellow chalk.

‘I’ve seen that before somewhere,’ I said. My vox bleeped. It was Wrex.

‘I’ve got that worker roster you asked for.’

‘Good. Where are you?’

‘Coming to find you at the tannery, if you’re still there.’

‘We’ll meet you on the corner of Xerxes Street. Tell your staff we have a crime scene in the agricultural warehouse.’

We walked out of the killing room towards the stairwell. Fischig froze, and brought up his gun.

‘Again?’ I whispered.

He nodded, and pushed Bequin into the cover of a door jamb.

Silence, apart from the rain and the scurry of vermin. Gun braced, Fischig looked up at the derelict roof. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed as if a shadow had moved across the bare rafters.

I moved forwards, scanning the shadows with my pistol. Something creaked: a floorboard.

Fischig pointed to the stairs. I nodded I understood, but the last thing I wanted was a mistaken shooting. I carefully keyed my vox and whispered, ‘Wrex. You’re not coming into the warehouse to find us, are you?’

‘Negative, inquisitor.’

‘Standby.’

Fischig had reached the top of the staircase. He peered down, aiming his weapon.

Las-fire erupted through the floorboards next to him, and he threw himself flat.

I put a trio of shots into the mouth of the staircase, but my angle was bad.

Two hard round shots spat back up the stairs, and then the roar and flash of the las came again, raking the floor.

From above, I realised belatedly. Whoever was on the stairs had a hard-slug sidearm, but the las-fire was coming down from the roof.

I heard steps running on the floor below. Fischig scrambled up to give chase, but another salvo of las-fire sent him ducking again.

I raised my aim, and fired up into the roof tiles, blowing out holes through which the pale light poked.

Something slithered and scrambled on the roof.

Fischig was on the stairs now, running after the second assailant.

I hurried across the third floor, following the sounds of the man on the roof.

I saw a silhouette against the sky through a hole in the tiles, and fired again. Las-fire replied in a bright burst, but then there was a thump and further slithering.

‘Cease fire! Give yourself up! Inquisition!’ I bellowed, using the will. There came a much more substantial crash sounding like a whole portion of the roof had come down. Tiles avalanched down, and smashed in a room nearby.

I slammed into the doorway, gun aimed, about to yell out a further will command. But there was no one in the room. Piles of shattered roof slates and bricks covered the floor beneath a gaping hole in the roof itself, and a battered lasrifle lay among the debris. On the far side of the room were some of the broken windows that Bequin had pointed out as overlooking the tannery roof.

I ran to one. Down below, a powerful figure in dark overalls was running for cover. The killer, escaping from me in just the same way his last victim had escaped him – through the windows onto the tannery roof.

The distance was too far to use the will again with any effect, but my aim and angle were good. I lined up on the back of the head a second before it disappeared, began to apply pressure–

–and the world exploded behind me.

I came round cradled in Bequin’s arms. ‘Don’t move, Eisenhower. The medics are coming.’

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘Booby trap. The gun that guy left behind? It exploded behind you. Powercell overload.’

‘Did Fischig get his man?’

‘Of course he did.’

He hadn’t, in fact. He’d chased the man hard down two flights of stairs and through the main floor of the warehall. At the outer door onto the street, the man had wheeled around and emptied his autopistol’s clip at the chastener, forcing him into cover.

Then Captain Wrex, approaching from outside, had gunned the man down in the doorway.

We assembled in Wrex’s crowded office in the busy Arbites Mid-Rise Sector-house. Aemos joined us, laden down with papers and data-slates, and brought Midas Betancore with him.

‘You all right?’ Midas asked me. In his jacket of embroidered cerise silk, he was a vivid splash of colour in the muted gloom of mid-rise.

‘Minor abrasions. I’m fine.’

‘I thought we were leaving, and here you are having all the fun without me.’

‘I thought we were leaving too until I saw this case. Review Bequin’s notes. I need you up to speed.’

Aemos shuffled his ancient, augmetically assisted bulk over to Wrex’s desk, and dropped his books and papers in an unceremonious pile.

‘I’ve been busy,’ he said.

‘Busy with results?’ Bequin asked.

He looked at her sourly. ‘No, actually. But I have gathered a commendable resource of information. As the discussion advances, I may be able to fill in blanks.’

‘No results, Aemos? Most perturbatory,’ grinned Midas, his white teeth gleaming against his dark skin. He was mocking the old savant by using Aemos’ favourite phrase.

I had before me the work roster of the warehouse where the three bodies had been found, and another for the agricultural store where our fight had occurred. Quick comparison brought up two coincident names.

‘Brell Sodakis. Vim Venik. Both worked as warehousemen before the place closed down. Now they’re employed by Hundlemas Agricultural Stowage.’

‘Backgrounds? Addresses?’ I asked Wrex.

‘I’ll run checks,’ she said.

‘So... we have a cult here, eh?’ Midas asked. ‘You’ve got a series of ritual killings, at least one murder site, and now the names of two possible cultists.’

‘Perhaps.’ I wasn’t convinced. There seemed both more and less to this than had first appeared. Inquisitorial hunch.

The remains of the lasrifle discarded by my assailant lay on an evidence tray. Even with the damage done by the overloading powercell, it was apparent that this was an old model.

‘Did the powercell overload because it was dropped? It fell through the roof, didn’t it?’ Bequin asked.

‘They’re pretty solid,’ Fischig answered.

‘Forced overload,’ I said. ‘An old Imperial Guard trick. I’ve heard they learn how to set one off. As a last ditch in tight spots. Cornered. About to die anyway.’

‘That’s not standard,’ said Fischig, poking at the trigger guard of the twisted weapon. His knowledge of guns was sometimes unseemly. ‘See this modification? It’s been machine-tooled to widen the guard around the trigger.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

Fischig shrugged. ‘Access? For an augmetic hand with rudimentary digits?’

We went through to a morgue room down the hall where the man Wrex had gunned down was lying on a slab. He was middle-aged, with a powerful frame, going to seed. His skin was weatherbeaten and lined.

‘Identity?’

‘We’re working on it.’

The body had been stripped by the morgue attendants. Fischig scrutinised it, rolling it with Wrex’s help to study the back. The man’s clothes and effects were in plasteen bags in a tray at his feet. I lifted the bag of effects, and held it up to the light.

‘Tattoo,’ reported Fischig. ‘Imperial eagle, left shoulder. Crude, old. Letters underneath it... capital S period, capital I period, capital I, capital X.’

I’d just found the signet ring in the bag. Gold, with a wheatear motif. ‘S.I. IX,’ said Aemos. ‘Sameter Infantry Nine.’

The Ninth Sameter Infantry had been founded in Urbitane twenty-three years before, and had served, as Aemos had already told me, in the brutal liberation war on Surealis Six. According to city records, five hundred and nineteen veterans of that war and that regiment had been repatriated to Sameter after mustering out thirteen years ago, coming back from the horrors of war to an increasingly depressed world beset by the blight of poverty and urban collapse. Their regimental emblem, as befitted a world once dominated by agriculture, was the wheatear.

‘They came back thirteen years ago. The oldest victim we have dates from that time,’ said Fischig.

‘Surealis Six was a hard campaign, wasn’t it?’ I asked.

Aemos nodded. ‘The enemy was dug in. It was ferocious, brutal. Brutalising. And the climate. Two white dwarf suns, no cloud cover. The most punishing heat and light, not to mention ultraviolet burning.’

‘Ruins the skin,’ I murmured. ‘Makes it weatherbeaten and prematurely aged.’

Everyone looked at the taut, lined face of the body on the slab.

‘I’ll get a list of the veterans,’ volunteered Wrex.

‘I already have one,’ said Aemos.

‘I’m betting you find the names Brell Sodakis and Vim Venik on it,’ I said.

Aemos paused as he scanned. ‘I do,’ he agreed.

‘What about Quater Traves?’

‘Yes, he’s here. Master Gunnery Sergeant Quater Traves.’

‘What about Omin Lund?’

‘Ummm... yes. Sniper first class. Invalided out of service.’

‘The Sameter Ninth was a mixed unit, then?’ asked Bequin.

‘All our Guard foundings are,’ Wrex said proudly.

‘So, these men... and women...’ Midas mused. ‘Soldiers, been through hell. Fighting the corruption... Your idea is they brought it back here with them? Some taint? You think they were infected by the touch of the warp on Surealis, and have been ritually killing as a way of worship back here ever since?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I think they’re still fighting the war.’

It remains a sad truth of the Imperium that virtually no veteran ever comes back from fighting its wars intact. Combat alone shreds nerves and shatters bodies. But the horrors of the warp, and of foul xenos forms, steal sanity forever, and leave veterans fearing the shadows, and the night and, sometimes, the nature of their friends and neighbours, for the rest of their lives.

The Guard of the Ninth Sameter Infantry had come home thirteen years before, broken by a savage war against mankind’s Archenemy and, through their scars and their fear, had brought their war back with them.

The Arbites mounted raids at once on the addresses of all the veterans on the list, those that could be traced, those that were still alive. It appeared that skin cancer had taken over two hundred of them in the years since their repatriation. Surealis had claimed them as surely as if they had fallen there in combat.

A number were rounded up. Bewildered drunks, cripples, addicts, a few honest men and women trying diligently to carry on with their lives. For those latter I felt especially sorry.

About seventy could not be traced. Many may well have disappeared, moved on, or died without it coming to the attention of the authorities. But

some had clearly fled. Lund, Traves, Sodakis, Venik for starters. Their habs were found abandoned, strewn with possessions as if the occupant had left in a hurry. So were the habs of twenty more belonging to names on the list.

The Arbites arrived at the hab of one, ex-corporal Geffin Sancto, in time to catch him in the act of flight. Sancto had been a flamer operator in the Guard, and like so many of his kind, had managed to keep his weapon as a memento. Screaming the battle cry of the Sameter Ninth, he torched Arbites in the stairwell of his building, before the tactical squads of the judiciary vaporised him in a hail of gunshots.

‘Why are they killing?’ Bequin asked me. ‘All these years, in secret ritual?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You do, Eisenhower. You so do!’

‘Very well. I can guess. The fellow worker who jokes at the Emperor’s expense and makes your fragile sanity imagine he is tainted with the warp. The rug-maker whose patterns suggest to you the secret encoding of Chaos symbols. The midwife you decide is spawning the offspring of the Archenemy in the mid-rise maternity hall. The travelling evangelist who seems just too damn fired up to be safe.’

She looked down at the floor of the Land Speeder. ‘They see daemons everywhere.’

‘In everything. In every one. And, so help them, they believe they are doing the Emperor’s work by killing. They trust no one, so they daren’t alert the authorities. They take the eyes, the hands and the tongue... all the organs of communication, any way the Archenemy might transmit his foul lies. And then they destroy the brain and heart, the organs which common soldier myth declares must harbour daemons.’

‘So where are we going now?’ she asked.

‘Another hunch.’

The Guildhall of the Sameter Agricultural Fraternity was a massive ragstone building on Furnace Street, its facade decaying from the ministrations of smog and acid rain. It had been disused for over two decades.

Its last duty had been to serve as a recruitment post of the Sameter Ninth during the founding. In its long hallways, the men and women of the Ninth had signed their names, collected their starchy new fatigues, and pledged their battle oath to the God-Emperor of mankind.

At certain times, under certain circumstances, when a proper altar to the Emperor is not available, Guard officers improvise in order to conduct their ceremonies. An Imperial eagle, an aquila standard, is suspended from a wall, and a sacred spot is marked on the floor beneath in yellow chalk.

The guildhall was not a consecrated building. The founding must have been the first time the young volunteers of Urbitane had seen that done. They'd made their vows to a yellow chalk cross and a dangling aquila.

Wrex was leading three fire-teams of armed Arbites, but I went in with Midas and Fischig first, quietly. Bequin and Aemos stayed by our vehicle. Midas was carrying his matched needle pistols, and Fischig an auto shotgun. I clipped a slab-pattern magazine full of fresh rounds into the precious bolt pistol given to me by Brytnoth of the Adeptus Astartes Deathwatch Chapter.

We pushed open the boarded doors of the decaying structure and edged down the dank corridors. Rainwater pattered from the roof, and the marble floor was spotted and eaten by collected acid.

We could hear the singing. A couple of dozen voices uttering the Battle Hymn of the Golden Throne.

I led my companions forward, hunched low. Through the crazed windows of an inner door we looked through into the main hall. Twenty-three dishevelled veterans in ragged clothes were knelt down in ranks on the filthy floor, their heads bowed to the rusty Imperial eagle hanging on the wall as they sang. There was a yellow chalk cross on the floor under the aquila. Each veteran had a backpack or rucksack and a weapon by their feet. My heart ached. This was how it had gone over two decades before, when they came to the service, young and fresh and eager. Before the war.

Before the horror.

'Let me try... try to give them a chance,' I said.

'Gregor!' Midas hissed.

'Let me try, for their sake. Cover me.'

I slipped into the back of the hall, my gun lowered at my side, and joined in the verse.

One by one, the voices died away, and bowed heads turned to look at me. Down the aisle, at the chalk cross of the altar, Lund, Traves and a bearded man I didn't know stood gazing at me.

In the absence of other voices, I finished the hymn.

‘It’s over,’ I said. ‘The war is over and you have all done your duty. Above and beyond the call.’

Silence.

‘I am Inquisitor Eisenhorn. I’m here to relieve you. The careful war against the blight of Chaos that you have waged through Urbitane in secret is now over. The Inquisition is here to take over. You can stand down.’

Two or three of the hunched veterans began to weep.

‘You lie,’ said Lund, stepping forwards.

‘I do not. Surrender your weapons, and I promise you will be treated fairly and with respect.’

‘Will... Will we get medals?’ the bearded man asked, in a quavering voice.

‘The gratitude of the God-Emperor will be with you always.’

More were weeping now. Out of fear, anxiety or plain relief.

‘Don’t trust him!’ said Traves. ‘It’s another trick!’

‘I saw you in my bar,’ said Lund, stepping forwards. ‘You came in looking.’ Her voice was empty, distant.

‘I saw you on the tannery roof, Omin Lund. You’re still a fine shot, despite the hand.’

She looked down at her prosthetic with a wince of shame.

‘Will we get medals?’ the bearded man repeated, eagerly.

Traves turned on him. ‘Of course we won’t, Spake, you cretin! He’s here to kill us!’

‘I’m not—’ I began.

‘I want medals!’ the bearded man, Spake, screamed suddenly, sliding his laspistol up from his belt with the fluid speed only a trained soldier can manage.

I had no choice.

His shot tore through the shoulder padding of my storm coat. My bolt exploded his head, spraying blood across the rusty metal eagle on the wall.

Pandemonium.

The veterans leapt to their feet, firing wildly, scattering, running.

I threw myself flat as shots tore out the wall plaster behind me. At some point, Fischig and Midas burst in, weapons blazing. I saw three or four veterans drop, sliced through by silent needles, and another six tumbled as shotgun rounds blew them apart.

Traves came down the aisle, blasting his old service-issue lasrifles at me. I rolled and fired, but my shot went wide. His face distorted as a needle round punched through it, and he fell in a crumpled heap.

Wrex and her fire-teams exploded in. Flames from some spilled accelerants billowed up the wall.

I got up, and then was thrown back by a las-shot that blew off my left hand.

Spinning, falling, I saw Lund, struggling to make her prosthetic fingers work the unmodified trigger of Traves' lasgun.

My bolt-round hit her with such force she flew back down the aisle, hit the wall, and tore the Imperial aquila down.

Not a single veteran escaped the Guildhall alive. The firefight raged for two hours. Wrex lost five men to the experienced guns of the Sameter Ninth veterans. They stood to the last. No more can be said of any Imperial Guard unit.

The whole affair left me sour and troubled. I have devoted my life to the service of the Imperium, to protect it against its manifold foes, inside and out.

Not against its servants. However misguided, they were loyal and true. However wrong, they were shaped that way by the service they had endured in the Emperor's name.

Lund cost me my hand. A hand for a hand. They gave me a prosthetic on Sameter. I never used it. For two years, I made do with a fused stump. Surgeons on Messina finally gave me a fully functional graft.

I consider it a small price to pay for them.

I have never been back to Sameter. Even today, they are still finding the secreted, hidden bodies. So very many, dead in the Emperor's name.

BACKCLOTH FOR A CROWN ADDITIONAL

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Lord Froigre, much to everyone's dismay including, I'm sure, his own, was dead.

It was a dry, summer morning in 355.M41, and I was taking breakfast with Alizebeth Bequin on the terrace of Spaeton House when I received the news. The sky was a blurry blue, the colour of Sameterware porcelain, and down in the bay the water was a pale lilac, shot through with glittering frills of silver. Sand doves warbled from the drowsy shade of the estate orchards.

Jubal Kircher, my craggy, dependable chief of household security, came out into the day's heat from the garden room, apologised courteously for interrupting our private meal, and handed me a folded square of thin transmission paper.

'Trouble?' asked Bequin, pushing aside her dish of plain crepes.

'Froigre's dead,' I replied, studying the missive.

'Froigre who?'

'Lord Froigre of House Froigre.'

'You knew him?'

'Very well. I would count him as a friend. Well, how very miserable. Dead at eighty-two. That's no age.'

'Was he ill?' Bequin asked.

'No. Aen Froigre was, if anything, maddeningly robust and healthy. Not a scrap of augmetics about him. You know the sort.' I made this remark pointedly. My career had not been kind to my body. I had been repaired, rebuilt, augmented and generally sewn back together more times than I cared to remember. I was a walking testimonial to Imperial medicae reconstruction surgery. Alizebeth, on the other hand, still looked like a woman in her prime, a beautiful woman at that, and only the barest minimum of juvenat work had preserved her so.

‘According to this, he died following a seizure at his home last night. His family is conducting thorough investigations, of course, but...’ I drummed my fingers on the tabletop.

‘Foul play?’

‘He was an influential man.’

‘Such men have enemies.’

‘And friends,’ I said. I handed her the communique. ‘That’s why his widow has requested my assistance.’

But for my friendship with Aen, I’d have turned the matter down. Alizebeth had only just arrived on Gudrun after an absence of almost eighteen months, and would be gone again in a week, so I had resolved to spend as much time with her as possible. The operational demands of the Distaff, based on Messina, kept her away from my side far more than I would have liked.

But this was important, and Lady Froigre’s plea too distraught to ignore. ‘I’ll come with you,’ Alizebeth suggested. ‘I feel like a jaunt in the country.’

She called for a staff car to be brought around from the stable block, and we were on our way in under an hour.

Felippe Gabon, one of Kircher’s security detail, acted as our driver. He guided the car up from Spaeton on a whisper of thrust, and laid in a course for Menizerre. Soon we were cruising south-west over the forest tracts and the verdant cultivated belt outside Dorsay, and leaving the Insume headland behind.

In the comfortable, climate-controlled rear cabin of the staff car, I told Alizebeth about Froigre.

‘There have been Froigres on Gudrun since the days of the first colonies. Their house is one of the Twenty-Six Venerables, that is to say one of the twenty-six original noble fiefs, and as such has an hereditary seat in the Upper Legislature of the planetary government. Other, newer houses have considerably more power and land these days, but nothing can quite eclipse the prestige of the Venerables. Houses like Froigre, Sangral, Meissian. And Glaw.’

She smiled impishly at my inclusion of that last name.

‘So... power, land, prestige... a honeytrap for rivals and enemies. Did your friend have any?’

I shrugged. I'd brought with me several data-slates Psullus had looked out for me from the library. They contained heraldic ledgers, family histories, biographies and memoirs. And very little that seemed pertinent.

'House Froigre vied with House Athensae and House Brudish in the early years of Gudrun, but that's literally ancient history. Besides, House Brudish became extinct after another feud with House Pariti eight hundred years ago. Aen's grandfather famously clashed with Lord Sangral and the then Governor Lord Dougray over the introduction of Founding Levy in the one-nineties, but that was just political, though Dougray never forgave him, and later snubbed him by making Richtien chancellor. In recent times, House Froigre has been very much a quiet, solid, traditional seat in the Legislature. No feuds, that I know of. In fact, there hasn't been an inter-house war on Gudrun for seven generations.

'They all play nicely together, these days, do they?' she asked.

'Pretty much. One of the things I like about Gudrun is that it is so damned civilised.'

'Too damned civilised,' she admonished. 'One day, Gregor, one day this place will lull you into such a deep sense of tranquil seclusion that you'll be caught with your pants down.'

'I hardly think so. It's not complacency, before you jump down my throat. Gudrun – Spaeton House itself – is just a safe place. A sanctuary, given my line of work.'

'Your friend's still dead,' she reminded me.

I sat back. 'He liked to live well. Good food, fine wines. He could drink Nayl under the table.'

'No!'

'I'm not joking. Five years ago, at the wedding of Aen's daughter. I was invited and I took Harlon along as... as I don't know what, actually. You weren't around, and I didn't want to go alone. Harlon started bending his lordship's ear with tales of bounty hunting, and the last I saw of them they were sprinting their way down their fourth bottle of anise at five in the morning. Aen was up at nine the next day to see his daughter off. Nayl was still asleep at nine the following day.'

She grinned. 'So a life of great appetites may have just caught up with him?'

'Perhaps. Though you'd think that would have shown up on the *medicae mortus* report.'

‘So you do suspect foul play?’

‘I can’t shake that idea.’

I was silent for a few minutes, and Alizebeth scrolled her way through several of the slates.

‘House Froigre’s main income was from mercantile dealings. They hold a twelve point stock in Brade ent Cie and a fifteen per cent share in Helican SubSid Shipping. What about trade rivals?’

‘We’d have to expand our scope off-planet. I suppose assassination is possible, but that’s a strange way to hit back at a trade rival. I’ll have to examine their records. If we can turn up signs of a clandestine trade fight, then maybe assassination is the answer.’

‘Your friend spoke out against the Ophidian Campaign.’

‘So did his father. Neither believed it was appropriate to divert funds and manpower into a war of reconquest in the subsector next door when there was so much to put in order on the home front.’

‘I was just wondering...’ she said.

‘Wonder away, but I think that’s a dead end. The Ophidian War’s long since over and done with, and I don’t think anyone cares what Aen thought about it.’

‘So have you got a theory?’

‘Only the obvious ones. None of them with any substantiating data. An internecine feud, targeting Aen from inside the family. A murder driven by some secret affair of the heart. A darker conspiracy that remains quite invisible for now. Or...’

‘Or?’

‘Too much good living, in which case we’ll be home before nightfall.’

Froigre Hall, the ancestral pile of the noble House Froigre, was a splendid stack of ivy-swathed ouslite and copper tiles overlooking the Vale of Fiegg, ten kilometres south of Menizerre. Water meadows sloped back from the river, becoming wildflower pastures that climbed through spinneys of larch and fintle to hem the magnificent planned gardens of the house; geometric designs of box-hedge, trim lawn, flowering beds and symmetrical ponds. Beyond the sandy drive, darkened woods came right down to skirt the back of the great hall, except for where a near-perfect sulleq lawn had been laid. Aen and I had spent several diverting afternoons there, playing against each other. A kilometre north of the house, the gnarled stone finger of the Folly rose from the ascending woods.

‘Where to put down, sir?’ Gabon asked over the intercom.

‘On the drive in front of the portico, if you’d be so kind.’

‘What’s been going on here?’ Alizebeth asked as we came in lower. She pointed. The lawn areas nearest to the hall were littered with scraps of rubbish – paper waste and glittery bits of foil. Some sections of grass were flat and yellow as if compressed and starved of light.

Tiny stones, whipped up by our downwash, ticked off the car’s body-work as we settled in to land.

‘Oh, my dear Gregor!’ Lady Freyl Froigre almost fell into my arms. I held her in a comforting embrace for a few patient moments as she sobbed against my chest.

‘Forgive me!’ she said suddenly, pulling away and dabbing her eyes with a black lace handkerchief. ‘This is all so very terrible. So very, very terrible.’

‘My deepest sympathies for your loss, lady,’ I said, feeling awkward.

A houseman, his arm banded in black, had led us into a stateroom off the main hall where Lady Froigre was waiting. The blinds were drawn, and mourning tapers had been lit, filling the air with a feeble light and a sickly perfume. Freyl Froigre was a stunning woman in her late sixties, her lush red hair, almost flame-pink it was so bright, pulled back and pinned down under a veil coiff of jet scamiscoire. Her grief-gown was slate epinchire, the sleeves ending in delicate interwoven gloves so that not one speck of her flesh was uncovered.

I introduced Alizebeth, who murmured her condolences, and Lady Froigre nodded. Then she suddenly looked flustered.

‘Oh, my. Where are my manners? I should have the staff bring refreshments for you and–’

‘Hush, lady,’ I said, taking her arm and walking her down the long room into the soft shade of the shutters. ‘You have enough on your mind. Grief is enough. Tell me what you know and I will do the rest.’

‘You’re a good man, sir. I knew I could trust you.’ She paused and waited while her current wracks subsided.

‘Aen died just before midnight last night. A seizure. It was quick, the physician said.’

‘What else did he say, lady?’

She drew a data-wand from her sleeve and handed it to me. ‘It’s all here.’ I plucked out my slate and plugged it in. The display lit up with the stored

files.

Death by tremorous palpitations of the heart and mind. A dysfunction of the spirit. According to the medic's report, Aen Froigre had died because of a spasm in his anima.

'This means...' I paused, '...nothing. Who is your physician?'

'Genorus Notil of Menizerre. He has been the family medic since the time of Aen's grandfather.'

'His report is rather... non-specific, lady. Could I present the body for a further examination?'

'I've already done that,' she said softly. 'The surgeon at Menizerre General who attended said the same. My husband died of terror.'

'Terror?'

'Yes, inquisitor. Now tell me that isn't the work of the infernal powers?' There had, she told me, been a celebration. A Grand Fete. Aen's eldest son, Rinton, had returned home two weeks before, having mustered out of his service in the Imperial Guard. Rinton Froigre had been a captain in the 50th Gudrunite and seen six years' service in the Ophidian Subsector. Such was his father's delight on his return, a fete was called. A carnival feast. Travelling players from all around the canton had attended, along with troupes of musicians, acrobats, armies of stall holders, entertainers, and hundreds of folk from the town. That explained the litter and faded patches on the lawn. Tent pitches. The scars of marquees.

'Had he any enemies?' I asked, pacing the shuttered room.

'None that I know of.'

'I would like to review his correspondence. Diaries too, if he kept them.'

'I'll see. I don't believe he kept a diary, but our rubricator will have a list of correspondence.'

On the top of the harpsichord was a framed portrait, a hololith of Aen Froigre, smiling.

I picked it up and studied it.

'The last portrait of him,' she said. 'Taken at the fete. My last connection with him.'

'Where did he die?'

'The Folly,' said Lady Froigre. 'He died in the Folly.'

The woods were damp and dark. Boughs creaked in the late afternoon wind, and odd birdsong thrilled from the shadows.

The Folly was a stone drum capped by a slate needle. Inside, it was bare and terribly musty. Sand doves fluttered up in the roof spaces. Cobwebs glazed the bare windows.

‘This is where I found him,’ said a voice from behind me.

I turned. Rinton Froigre stooped in under the doorframe. He was a well-made boy of twenty-five, with his mother’s lush red hair. His eyes had a curious, hooded aspect.

‘Rinton.’

‘Sir,’ he bowed slightly.

‘Was he dead when you found him?’

‘No, inquisitor. He was laughing and talking. He liked to come up here. He loved the Folly. I came up to thank him for the fete that he had thrown in my honour. We were talking together when suddenly he went into convulsions. Just minutes later, before I could summon help, he was dead.’

I didn’t know Rinton Froigre well, though his service record was very respectable, and I knew his father had been proud of him. Aen had never mentioned any animosity from his son, but in any noble house there is always the spectre of succession to consider. Rinton had been alone with his father at the time of death. He was a seasoned soldier, undoubtedly no stranger to the act of killing.

I kept an open mind – literally. Even without any invasive mental probing, it is possible for a psionic of my ability to sense surface thoughts. There was no flavour of deceit about Rinton’s person, though I could feel carefully contained loss, and the tingle of trepidation. Small wonder, I considered. Uncommon are the citizens of the Imperium who do not register anxiety at being quizzed by an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos.

There was no point pressing him now. Rinton’s story might easily be put to the test with an auto-seance, during which psychometric techniques would simply reveal the truth of his father’s last moments to me.

Rinton walked me back to the Hall, and left me to my ponderings in Aen’s study. It was as he had left it, I was told.

The room was half-panelled, and lined for the most part with glazed shelves of neatly bound books and data-slates. Discreet glow-globes hovered around the edges of the room at head height, set to a low luminosity, and a selection of scroll-backed couches and over-stuffed chairs were arranged in front of the high-throated ceramic fireplace with its wood-burning fusion stove.

The desk, under the diamond-paned west windows, was a wide crescent of polished duralloy floated a metre off the carpet by passive suspensor pods. The desk was clean and bare.

I sat at it, depressing slightly the hydraulics of the writing chair – I was half a head taller than Aen Froigre. I studied the mirror-smooth, slightly raked surface of the desk. There was no sign of any control panel, but a gentle wave of my hand across it woke up heat-sensitive touch-plates engraved into the duralloy's finish. I touched a few, but they needed Aen's touch – probably a combination of palmprint and genekey – to unlock them.

That, or inquisition-grade software. I unpinned my Inquisitorial rosette, which I had been wearing on the sternum of my black leather coat, and slid open the signal port. Holding it low over the desk, I force fed the touch-plates with several magenta-level security override programs. It gave up the fight almost at once, opening systems without even the need for passwords.

Built into the stylish desk – an item of furniture that had clearly cost Aen a lot of money – was a fairly powerful cogitator, a vox-pict uplink, a message archive, two filing archives, and a master control for the simple, limited electronic systems built into the Hall. Separate pages of each file and message could be displayed as a facsimile on the blotter plate, and a touch of a finger turned them or put them away. Aen had destroyed all paper records.

I played with it for some time, but the most interesting thing I found was a log of invoices for services provided at the fete, and a list of the invitations. I copied both into my data-slate.

Alizebeth and Gabon arrived while I was busy with that. Alizebeth had been interviewing the household staff, and Gabon had been out, walking the grounds.

'There were over nine hundred guests here, sir,' he said, 'and maybe another five hundred players, musicians, entertainers and carnival folk.'

'Where from?'

'Menizerre, mostly,' he replied. 'Local entertainers, a few troubadours and some street tumblers from the biweekly textile market. The biggest individual groups were Kalikin's Company, an acclaimed troupe of travelling actors, and Sunsable's Touring Fair, who provided the games and rides and diversions.'

I nodded. Gabon was as thorough as usual. A short, spare man in his one-fifties with cropped black hair and a bushy moustache, he had been with the

Dorsay Arbites for about seventy years before retiring into private service. He wore a simple, refined dark blue suit that had been ingeniously tailored to hide the fact that he was wearing a handgun in a shoulder rig.

‘What about you?’ I asked Alizebeth. She sat down on one of the couches.

‘Nothing scintillating. The staff seem genuinely shocked and upset at the death. They all react with outrage at the idea your friend might have had any enemies.’

‘It seems quite clear to me that he did have some,’ I said.

Alizebeth reached into the folds of her gown and fished out a small, hard object. She tossed it onto the desk top, and it landed with a tap.

There it extended four, multijointed limbs, and scurried across onto my palm.

I turned the wriggling poison-snooper over, and pressed the recessed stud on its belly. A little ball of hololithic energy coalesced above its head-mounted projector, and I read it as it slowly scrolled around on its axis. ‘Traces of lho, obscura and several other class two and three narcotics in the garden area and the staff quarters. Penshel seed traces found in the stable block. More lho, as well as listeria and E. coli in small amounts in the kitchen section... hmmm...’

Alizebeth shrugged. ‘The usual mix of recreational drugs one might expect, none in large quantities, and the kitchen’s as hygienic as anywhere. You’d probably get the same sort of readings from Spaeton House.’

‘Probably. Penshel seeds, they’re quite unusual.’

‘A very mild stimulant,’ said Gabon. ‘I didn’t know anyone still used that stuff. Time was, it was the drug of choice in the artists’ quarter of Dorsay, back when I was on the force. The seeds are dried, rolled and smoked in pipes. A little bohemian, an old man’s smoke.’

‘Most of the outdoor traces can be put down to the visiting entertainers,’ I mused, ‘plus a little off-duty pleasure from the staff or loose-living guests. What about the stable block? Are any of Froigre’s ostlers penshel smokers?’

Alizebeth shook her head. ‘They’d cleared large parts of the stable area to provide spaces for the fair stall-holders.’

I put the snooper down on the desk, and it wriggled back and forth for a few moments until it got enough purchase to right itself. ‘So nothing untoward, in fact. And certainly no significant toxins.’

‘None at all,’ said Alizebeth.

Damn. Given the description of Aen's death, I had been quite sure poison was the key, perhaps some assassin's sophisticated toxin that had not shown up on the initial medicae report. But Alizebeth's snooper was high-grade and thorough.

'What do we do now?' she asked.

I passed her my data-slate. 'Send the contents of this to Aemos by direct vox-link. See what he can come up with.'

Uber Aemos was my ancient and trusted savant. If anyone could see a pattern or make a connection, it was him.

Evening fell. I went outside, alone. I felt annoyed and frustrated. In fact, I felt thwarted. I'd come there as a favour to my old friend's widow, offering my services, and in most respects I was overqualified. I was an Imperial inquisitor, and this was most likely just a job for the local Arbites. I had expected to have the entire matter sewn up in a few hours, to settle things swiftly in a quick, unofficial investigation, and leave with the thanks of the family for sparing them a long, drawn-out inquest.

But the clues just weren't there. There was no motive, no obvious antagonist, no aggressor, but still it seemed likely that Aen Froigre had been killed. I looked at the medicae report again, hoping to find something that would establish natural causes.

Nothing. Something, someone, had taken my friend's life, but I couldn't tell what or who or why.

The evening skies were dark, stained a deep violet and smeared with chasing milky clouds. An early moon shone, passing behind the running trails of cloud every minute or so. A wind was gathering, and the stands of trees beside the lawn were beginning to sway and swish. The leaves made a cold sound, like rain.

I walked over to my flyer, popped the cargo trunk and took out Barbarisater. I slowly freed it from its silk bindings, and drew the long, gleaming blade from its machined scabbard. Barbarisater had been an heirloom sword, a psychically attuned weapon from the forges of distant Carthae, and slaved to the minds of the generations of warrior women who had wielded it. Enhancing its strength with pentagrammic wards, I had used the long sabre in my battle against the heretic Quixos, during which struggle it had been broken below the tip. Master swordsmiths had remade the blade from the broken main portion, creating a shorter, straighter blade by rounding off and edging the break and reducing the hilt. A good deal

smaller than its old self, now more a single-handed rapier than a hand-and-a-half sabre, it was still a potent weapon.

Naked, in my hand, it hummed and whined as my mind ran through it and made it resonate. The incised wards glowed and sobbed out faint wisps of smoke. I walked across the grass under the seething trees, holding the blade before me like a dowsing rod, sweeping the scene, letting the blade-tip slide along the invisible angles of space. Twice, on my circuit of the lawns, it twitched as if tugged by sprite hands, but I could discern nothing from the locations.

But there was something there. My first hint of a malign focus. My first hint that not only was foul play involved, but that Lady Froigre might be right.

Though they had left only the slightest traces behind them, infernal powers had been at work here.

Alizebeth came into my room at eight the next morning. She woke me by sitting down on the side of my bed, and handed me a cup of hot, black caffeine as I roused.

She was already dressed and ready for work. The day was bright. I could hear the household coming to life: pans clattering in the kitchen block, and the butler calling to his pages in the nearby gallery.

‘Bad storm in the night,’ she said. ‘Brought trees down.’

‘Really?’ I grumbled, sitting up and sipping the sweet, dark caffeine. I looked at her. It wasn’t like Bequin to be so perky this early.

‘Out with it,’ I said.

She handed me a data-slate. ‘Aemos has been busy. Must’ve worked all night.’

‘Through the storm.’

‘There was no storm up his way. It was local.’ I didn’t really hear that reply. I was caught up in a close reading of the slate.

Failing to cross-match just about every detail I had sent him, Aemos had clearly become bored. The list of guests I had sent him had led to nothing, despite his best efforts to make connections. The caterers and performers had revealed nothing either. No links to the underworld or cult activity, no misdeeds or priors, except for the usual clutch of innocent and minor violations one might expect. One of the travelling actors had been charged with affray twenty years before, and another had done time for grievous wounding, that sort of thing.

The only item that had flagged any sort of connection was the description of Aen Froigre's death. Aemos had only turned to that rather vague clue once he'd exhausted all others.

In the past twenty months, eleven people in the Drunner Region of Gudrun, which is to say the coastal area encompassing Menizerre, Dorsay and Insume all the way to Madua chapeltown, had died of a similar, mystery ailment. Only a tight, deliberate search like the one Aemos had conducted would have shown up such a connection, given the scale of the area involved and the size of population. Listed together, the deaths stood out like a sore thumb.

Here, Aemos had come into his own. Another clerk might have sent those findings to me and waited for direction, but Aemos, hungry to answer the questions himself, had pressed on, trying to make a pattern out of them. No simple task. There was nothing to demographically or geographically link the victims. A housewife here, a millkeeper there, a landowner in one small village, a community doctor in another, seventy kilometres away.

The only thing they had in common was the sudden, violent and inexplicable nature of their demises: seizures, abrupt, fatal.

I set down my cup and scrolled on, aware that Alizebeth was grinning at me.

'Get to the last bit,' she advised. 'Aemos strikes again.'

Right at the last, Aemos revealed another connection.

A day or two before each death, the victim's locality had been paid a visit by Sunsable's Touring Fair.

Lady Froigre was most perturbed to see us about to leave.

'There are questions here still...' she began.

'And I'm going to seek the answers,' I said. 'Trust me. I believe my savant has hit upon something.'

She nodded, unhappy. Rinton stepped forwards, and put his arm around his mother's shoulders.

'Trust me,' I repeated, and walked out across the drive to my waiting flyer. I could hear the sound of chainblades, and turned from the car to walk around the side of the hall. One of the trees brought down in the night's freak storm had crushed part of the stable block, and the housemen were working to saw up the huge trunk and clear it.

'Is that where you detected Penshel seed?' I asked Alizebeth when she came to find out what was keeping me.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Fetch my blade.’

I called the housemen away from their work, and walked into the collapsed ruin of the stable, crunching over heaps of coarse sawdust. The ivy-clad tree still sprawled through the burst roof.

Alizebeth brought me Barbarisater, and I drew it quickly. By then, Lady Froigre and Rinton Froigre had emerged to see what I was doing.

Barbarisater hummed in my hand, louder and more throatily than it had done the previous night. As soon as I entered that part of the stable block, the particular stall the tree had smashed, it jumped. The taste of Chaos was here.

‘What was this used for?’ I asked. ‘During the fete, what was this area used for?’

‘Storage,’ said Lady Froigre. ‘The people from the fair wanted to keep equipment and belongings out of sight. Food too, I think. One man had trays of fresh figs he wanted to keep out of the light.’

‘And the hololithographer,’ said Rinton. ‘He used one of those stalls as a dark room.’

So how do you find a travelling fair in an area the size of the Drunner Region? If you have a copy of their most recent invoice, it’s easy. The fair-master, eager to be paid for his services at Froigre Hall, had left as a payment address an inn eighty kilometres away in Seabrud. From the invoice, I saw that Aen had been asked to mail the payment within five days. The fair moved around a great deal, and the travelling folk didn’t believe much in the concept of credit accounts.

From Seabrud, we got a fix on the location of Sunsable’s Fair.

They had pitched on a meadow outside the village of Brudmarten, a little, rustic community of ket-herds and weavers that was flanked by a lush, deciduous woodland hillside to the east and marshy, cattle-trampled fields below at the river spill to the west.

It was late afternoon on a hot, close day, the air edged with the heavy, fulminous threat of storms. The sky was dark overhead, but the corn was bright and golden in the meadows, and pollen balls blew in the breeze like thistle-fibres. Grain-crakes whooped in the corn stands, and small warblers of the most intense blue darted across the hedges.

Gabon lowered the limo to rest in a lane behind the village kirk, a pale, Low Gothic temple in need of upkeep. A noble statue of the Emperor

Immaculate stood in the overgrown graveyard, a roost for wood doves. I buckled on my sword and covered it with a long leather cloak. Gabon locked the car.

‘Stay with me,’ I told Alizebeth, and then turned to Gabon. ‘Shadow us.’
‘Yes, sir.’

We walked down the lane towards the fair.

Even from a distance, we could hear the noise and feel the energy. The arrival of the fair had brought the folk of Brudmarten and the neighbouring hamlets out in force. Pipe organs were trilling and wheezing in the dank air, and there was the pop and whizz of firecrackers. I could hear laughter, the clatter of rides, the ringing of score bells, children screaming, rowdy men carousing, pistons hissing. The smell of warm ale wafted from the tavern tent.

The gate in the meadow’s hedge had been turned into an entranceway, arched with a gaudy, hand-painted sign that declared Sunsable’s Miraculous Fair of Fairs open. A white-eyed twist at the gateway took our coins for admission.

Inside, on the meadow, all manner of bright, vulgar sights greeted us. The carousel, lit up with gas-lamps. The ring-toss. The neat, pink box-tent of the clairvoyant. The churning hoop of the whirligig, spilling out the squeals of children. The colourful shouts of the freak show barker. The burnt-sugar smell of floss makers. The clang of test-your-strength machines.

For a penny, you could ride the shoulders of a Battle Titan – actually an agricultural servitor armoured with painted sections of rusty silage hopper. For another penny, you could shoot greenskins in the las-gallery, or touch the Real and Completely Genuine shin bone of Macharius, or dunk for ploins. For tuppence, you could gaze into the Eye of Terror and have your heroism judged by a hooded man with a stutter who claimed to be an ex-Space Marine. The Eye of Terror in this case was a pit dug in the ground and filled with chemical lamps and coloured glass filters.

Nearby, a small donation allowed you to watch an oiled man struggle free from chains, or a burning sack, or a tin bathtub full of broken glass, or a set of stocks.

‘Just a penny, sir, just a penny!’ howled a man on stilts with a harlequined face as he capered past me. ‘For the young lady!’

I decided not to ask what my penny might buy.

‘I want to go look at the freak show,’ Alizebeth told me.

‘Save your money... it’s all around us,’ I growled.

We pushed on. Coloured balloons drifted away over the field into the encroaching darkness of the thunderhead. Corn crickets rasped furiously in the trampled stalks all around us. Drunken, painted faces swam at us, some lacking teeth, some with glittering augmetic eyes.

‘Over there,’ I whispered to Alizebeth.

Past the brazier stand of a woman selling paper cones of sugared nuts, and a large handcart stacked with wire cages full of songbirds, was a small booth tent of heavy red material erected at the side of a brightly painted trailer. A wooden panel raised on bunting-wrapped posts announced ‘Hololiths! Most Lifelike! Most Agreeable!’ below which a smaller notice said ‘A most delightful gift, or a souvenir of the day, captured by the magic art of a master hololithographer.’ A frail old man with tufted white hair and small spectacles was sitting outside the booth on a folding canvas chair, eating a meat pie that was so hot he had to keep blowing on it.

‘Why don’t you go and engage his interest?’ I suggested.

Alizebeth left my side, pushed through the noisy crowd and stopped by his booth. A sheet of flakboard had been erected beside the booth’s entrance, and on it were numerous hololithic pictures mounted for display: some miniatures, some landscapes, some family groups. Alizebeth studied them with feigned interest. The old man immediately leapt up off his chair, stowed the half-eaten pie behind the board and brushed the crumbs off his robes. I moved to one side, staying in the crowd, watching. I paused to examine the caged birds, though in fact I was looking through their cages at the booth tent.

The old man approached Bequin courteously.

‘Madam, good afternoon! I see your attention has been arrested by my display of work. Are they not fairly framed and well-composed?’

‘Indeed,’ she said.

‘You have a good eye, madam,’ he said, ‘for so often in these country fairs the work of the hololithographer is substandard. The composition is frequently poor and the plate quality fades with time. Not so with your humble servant. I have plied this trade of portraiture for thirty years and I fancy I have the skill for it. You see this print here? The lakeshore at Entreve?’

‘It is a pleasing scene.’

‘You are very kind, madam. It is handcoloured, like many of my frames. But this very print was made in the summer of... 329, if my memory serves. And you’ll appreciate, there is no fading, no loss of clarity, no discolouration.’

‘It has preserved itself well.’

‘It has,’ he agreed, merrily. ‘I have patented my own techniques, and I prepare the chemical compounds for the plates by hand, in my modest studio adjoining.’ He gestured to his trailer. ‘That is how I can maintain the quality and the perfect grade of the hololiths, and reproduce and print them to order with no marked loss of standard from original to duplicate. My reputation rests upon it. Up and down the byways of the land, the name Bakunin is a watchword for quality portraiture.’

Alizebeth smiled. ‘It’s most impressive, Master Bakunin. And how much...?’

‘Aha!’ he grinned. ‘I thought you might be tempted, madam, and may I say it would be a crime for your beauty to remain unrecorded! My services are most affordable.’

I moved around further, edging my way to the side of his booth until he and Alizebeth were out of sight behind the awning. I could hear him still making his pitch to her.

On the side of the trailer, further bold statements and enticements were painted in a flourishing script. A large sign read ‘Portraits two crowns, group scenes three crowns, gilded miniatures a half-crown only, offering many a striking and famous backcloth for a crown additional.’

I wandered behind the trailer. It was parked at the edge of the fairground, near to a copse of fintle and yew that screened the meadow from pastures beyond the ditch. It was damp and shaded here, small animals rustling in the thickets. I tried to look in at one small window, but it was shuttered. I touched the side of the trailer, and felt Barbarisater twitch against my hip. There was a door near the far end of the trailer. I tried it, but it was locked.

‘What’s your business?’ growled a voice.

Three burly fairground wranglers had approached along the copse-side of the booths. They had been smoking lho-sticks behind their trailer on a break.

‘Not yours,’ I assured them.

‘You had best be leaving Master Bakunin’s trailer alone,’ one said. All three were built like wrestlers, their bared arms stained with crude tattoos.

I had no time for this.

‘Go away now,’ I said, pitching my will through my voice. They all blinked, not quite sure what had happened to their minds, and then simply walked away as if I wasn’t there.

I returned my attention to the door, and quickly forced the lock with my multi-key. To my surprise, the thin wooden door still refused to open. I wondered if it was bolted from inside, but as I put more weight into it, it did shift a little, enough to prove there was nothing physical holding it. Then it banged shut as if drawn by immense suction.

My pulse began to race. I could feel the sour tang of warpcraft in the air, and Barbarisater was vibrating in its scabbard. It was time to dispense with subtleties.

I paced around to the front of the booth, but there was no longer any sign of Bequin or the old man. Stooping, I went in under the entrance flap. An inner drop curtain of black cloth stopped exterior light from entering the tent.

I pushed that aside.

‘I will be with you shortly, sir,’ Bakunin called, ‘if you would give me a moment.’

‘I’m not a customer,’ I said. I looked around. The tent was quite small, and lit by the greenish glow of gas mantles that ran, I supposed, off the trailer supply. Alizebeth was sitting at the far side on a ladderback chair with a dropcloth of cream felt behind her. Bakunin was facing her, carefully adjusting his hololithic camera, a brass-and-teak machine mounted on a wooden tripod. He looked around at me curiously, his hands still polishing a brass-rimmed lens. Alizebeth rose from her seat.

‘Gregor?’ she asked.

‘The good lady is just sitting for a portrait, sir. It’s all very civilised.’ Bakunin peered at me, unsure what to make of me. He smiled and offered his hand. ‘I am Bakunin, artist and hololithographer.’

‘I am Eisenhorn, Imperial inquisitor.’

‘Oh,’ he said and took a step backwards. ‘I... I...’

‘You’re wondering why a servant of the ordos has just walked into your booth,’ I finished for him. Bakunin’s mind was like an open book. There was, I saw at once, no guile there, except for the natural money-making trickery of a fairground rogue. Whatever else he was, Bakunin was no heretic.

‘You took a portrait of Lord Froigre at the fete held on his lands just the other day?’ I said, thinking of the picture on the harpsichord back at the hall.

‘I did,’ he said. ‘His lordship was pleased. I made no charge for the work, sir. It was a gift to thank his lordship for his hospitality. I thought perhaps some of his worthy friends might see the work and want the like for themselves, I...’

He doesn’t know, I thought. He has no clue what this is about. He’s trying to work out how he might have drawn this investigation to himself.

‘Lord Froigre is dead,’ I told him.

He went pale. ‘No, that’s... that’s...’

‘Master Bakunin... do you know if any other of your previous subjects have died? Died soon after your work was complete?’

‘I don’t, I’m sure. Sir, what are you implying?’

‘I have a list of names,’ I said, unclipping my data-slate. ‘Do you keep records of your work?’

‘I keep them all, all the exposed plates, in case copies or replacements are needed. I have full catalogues of all pictures.’

I showed him the slate. ‘Do you recognise any of these names?’

His hands were shaking. He said, ‘I’ll have to check them against my catalogue,’ but I knew for a fact he’d recognised some of them at once.

‘Let’s do that together,’ I said. Alizebeth followed us as we went through the back of the tent into the trailer. It was a dark, confined space, and Bakunin kept apologising. Every scrap of surface, even the untidy flat of his little cot bed, was piled with spares and partly disassembled cameras. There was a musty, chemical stink, mixed with the scent of Penshel seeds. Bakunin’s pipe lay in a small bowl. He reached into a crate under the cot and pulled out several dog-eared record books.

‘Let me see now,’ he began.

There was a door at the end of the little room.

‘What’s through there?’

‘My dark room, along with the file racks for the exposed plates.’

‘It has a door to the outside?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Locked?’

‘No...’

‘You have an assistant then, someone you ordered to hold the door shut?’

‘I have no assistant...’ he said, puzzled.

‘Open this door,’ I told him. He put down the books and went to the communicating door. Just from his body language, I could tell he had been expecting it to open easily.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘It’s never jammed before.’

‘Stand back,’ I said, and drew Barbarisater. The exposed blade filled the little trailer with ozone, and Bakunin yelped.

I put the blade through the door with one good swing, and ripped it open. There was a loud bang of atmospheric decompression, and foetid air swept over us. A dark, smoky haze drifted out.

‘Emperor of Mankind, what is that?’

‘Warpcraft,’ I said. ‘You say you mix your own oxides and solutions?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where do you get your supplies from?’

‘Everywhere, here and there, sometimes from apothecaries, or market traders or...’

Anywhere. Bakunin had experimented with all manner of compounds over the years to create the best, most effective plates for his camera. He’d never been fussy about where the active ingredients came from. Something in his workshop, something in his rack of flasks and bottles, was tainted.

I took a step towards the darkroom. In the half-light, things were flickering, half-formed and pale. The baleful energies lurking in Bakunin’s workshop could sense I was a threat, and were trying to protect themselves by sealing the doors tight to keep me out.

I crossed the threshold into the darkroom. Alizebeth’s cry of warning was lost in the shrieking of tormented air that suddenly swirled around me. Glass bottles and flasks of mineral tincture vibrated wildly in metal racks above Bakunin’s work bench. Jars of liquid chemicals and unguent oils shattered and sprayed their contents into the air. The little gas-jet burner flared and ignited, its rubber tube thrashing like a snake. Glass plates, each a square the size of a data-slate, and each sleeved in a folder of tan card, were jiggling and working themselves out of the wooden racks on the far side of the blacked-out room. There were thousands of them, each one the master exposure of one of Bakunin’s hololiths. The first yanked clear of the shelf as if tugged by a sucking force, and I expected it to shatter on the floor, but it floated in the air. Quickly, others followed suit. Light from

sources I couldn't locate played in the air, casting specks and flashes of colour all around. The air itself became dark brown, like tobacco.

I raised my sword. A negative plate flew at my head, and I struck at it. Shards of glass flew in all directions. Another came at me, and I smashed that too. More flew from the shelves like a spray of playing cards, whipping through the air towards me. I made a series of quick uwe sar and ulsar parries, bursting the glass squares as they struck in. I missed one, and it sliced my cheek with its edge before hitting the wall behind me like a throwing knife.

'Get him out of here!' I yelled to Alizebeth. The trailer was shaking. Outside there was a crash of thunder, and rain started to hammer on the low roof. The hurtling plates were driving me back, and Barbarisater had become a blur in my hands as it struck out to intercept them all.

Then the ghosts came. Serious men in formal robes. Gentlewomen in long gowns. Solemn children with pale faces. A laughing innkeeper with blotchy cheeks. Two farmhands, with their arms around each other's shoulders. More, still more, shimmering in the dirty air, made of smoke, their skins white, their clothes sepia, their expressions frozen at the moment they had been caught by the camera. They clawed and tugged at me with fingers of ice, pummelled me with psychokinetic fists. Some passed through me like wraiths, chilling my marrow. The malevolence hiding in that little trailer was conjuring up all the images Bakunin had immortalised in his career, ripping them off the negative plates and giving them form.

I staggered back, tears appearing in my cloak. Their touch was as sharp as the edges of the glass plates. Their hollow screaming filled my ears. Then, with a sickening lurch, the world itself distorted and changed. The trailer was gone. For a moment I was standing on a sepia shoreline, then I was an uninvited guest at a country wedding. My sword hacking and flashing, I stumbled on into a baptism, then a colourised view of the Atenate Mountains, then a feast in a guild hall. The ghosts surged at me, frozen hands clawing. The innkeeper with the blotchy cheeks got his icy fists around my throat, though his face was still open in laughter. I chopped Barbarisater through him, and he billowed like smoke. A sad-faced housemaid pulled at my arm, and a fisherman struck at me with his boat hook.

I began to recite the Litany of Salvation, yelling it into the leering faces that beset me. A few crumpled and melted like cellulose exposed to flame. I

heard gunshots. Gabon was to my right, firing his weapon. He was standing on the pier at Dorsay at sunset, in the middle of an inter-village game of knockball, and a harvest festival, all at the same time. The conflicting scenes blurred and merged around him. A bride and her groom, along with five mourners from a funeral and a retiring Arbites constable in full medals, were attacking him.

‘Get back!’ I yelled. Barbarisater was glowing white-hot. Thunder crashed again, shaking the earth. Gabon shrieked as the bride’s fingers ripped through his face, and as he stumbled backwards, whizzing glass plates chopped into him like axe heads.

His blood was in the air, like rain. It flooded into the ghosts and stained their sepia tones crimson and their pale flesh pink. I felt fingers like knives draw across the flesh of my arms and back. There were too many of them. I couldn’t trust my eyes. According to them, I was standing on a riverbank, and also the front steps of an Administratum building.

The locations overlaid each other impossibly, and neither was real.

I leapt, and lashed out with my blade. I hit something, tore through and immediately found myself rolling on the rain-sodden turf behind the trailer.

Lightning split the darkness overhead, and the rain was torrential. The storm and the bizarre activity around Bakunin’s booth had sent the commonfolk fleeing from the meadow. The trailer was still vibrating and shaking, and oily brown smoke was gushing from the hole in the side wall I’d cut to break my way out. Inside, lights crackled and flashed, and the phantom screaming continued. The warptaint was berserk.

Bakunin appeared, looking desperate, with Alizebeth close behind him. He put his hands to his mouth in shock at the sight of me torn and bloodied.

‘Where is it?’ I snarled.

‘Third shelf up, above the workbench,’ he stammered. ‘The green bottle. I needed tincture of mercury, years ago, years ago, and an old woman in one of the villages gave it to me and said it would do as well. I use it all the time now. The emulsions it mixes are perfect. My work has never been better.’

He looked down at the grass, shaking and horrified.

‘I should have realised,’ he muttered. ‘I should have realised. No matter how much I used, the bottle never emptied.’

‘Third shelf up?’ I confirmed.

‘I’ll show you,’ he said, and sprang to the trailer, clambering in through the hole I had smashed.

‘Bakunin! No!’

I followed him inside, tumbling back into the jumble of landscapes and the maelstrom of screaming ghosts. Just for a moment, a brief moment, I saw Aen Froigre amongst them.

Then I was falling through another wedding, a hunting scene, a stockman’s meeting, a farrier’s smithy, the castle of Elempite by moonlight, a cattle market, a—

I heard Bakunin scream.

I deflected three more deadly hololith plates, and slashed through the thicket of howling ghosts. Spectral, as if it wasn’t there, I saw the workbench and the shelves. The green bottle, glowing internally with jade fire. I raised Barbarisater and smashed the bottle with the edge of the shivering blade.

The explosion shredded the inner partition wall and lurched the trailer onto its side. Dazed, I lay on the splintered wall, sprawled amongst the debris of glass and wood.

The screaming stopped.

Someone had called the local Arbites. They moved through the crowds of onlookers as the last of the rain fell and the skies began to clear.

I showed them my credentials, and told them to keep the crowd back while I finished my work. The trailer was already burning, and Alizebeth and I threw the last few hololith prints into the flames.

The pictures were fading now. Superimposed on each one, every portrait, every landscape, every miniature, was a ghost exposure. An after-image.

Bakunin, screaming his last scream forever.

THE STRANGE DEMISE OF TITUS ENDOR

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The city was a hollow, failing place that was trying to turn its fortunes around, so it was apt that Titus Endor should wash up there. He'd long since lost the lustre that had made him one of the ordo's rising stars. Like a counterfeit coin, his value had been exposed as short weight. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

Titus Endor took another drink, and reflected that life could be worse.

It had seemed to have been winter for two or three years. Snow fell all the time, but the city streets were so warm and busy, nothing lay for long. Slush filled the gutters, and the edges of the kerbs were crusted with polished deposits of old grey ice. Tiny snowflakes freighted the air, caught in the streetlights. They drifted like random thoughts, or disconnected clues.

The city's name was Marisberg. Or perhaps it was Chericoberg, or Zsammstadd? They were all alike, the brute towns clinging to the oily edge of Karoscura's western continent. The drifting clues had dragged him from one conurbation to the next, from one drab residentiary to another, and they all blurred into one: the same streets, the same sallow faces in the street lights, the same bars and dining halls, the same smell of wet rockcrete, the same snow. He walked alone, after hours, ate alone in eating rooms where the other tables were stacked with chairs, made calls and asked questions, and reviewed the notes he'd scribbled in his copy books.

There were a lot of copy books. He disliked data-slates, and never threw his papers away. They formed the bulk of his luggage. He always made sure he had a spare crown or two to tip the next poor concierge confronted with the task of lugging his possessions from the street to a newly rented room.

Gonrad Maliko had been a professor of ethnic diversity at Sarum, specialising in taboos and stratified eating. Endor had a potted biography of him written out in one of the copy books. In another, a green-covered book

marked 435, were the case notes of Maliko's crime, a shameless affront on Eustis Majoris involving eleven sub-adult males.

Endor had almost snared Maliko in the arctic city of Cazzad, but the timing had been out, and the tip-off too vague. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

Titus Endor had inherited a fondness for symphonic music from his first master, the late Hapshant. Hapshant had been a real character. Installed at a bar, in the late evening, a glass in his hand, Endor would riff tirelessly about Hapshant. 'Believe you me, a real character,' he would say to his conversation partner, usually the barman, or any solitary drinker with a spare seat beside him. 'Mad as a fiddle, in the end,' Endor always added, tapping his brow, 'worms in the head, you see.'

Endor remembered the days, a long time ago, when he would patiently wind up the old voxcordian Hapshant took with him wherever he went, to play some old wax disc of crackling symphonic music to help his master think. Endor had been Hapshant's pupil, Hapshant's brightest pupil. As an interrogator, he had served Hapshant right to the end of the great man's life. There had been two of them, actually, two interrogators, Titus and his friend Gregor. Tight, they'd been, best friends in service and out. Titus, though, had always been the one with a luminous future, because Gregor was too serious and charmless. They had both become inquisitors, and stayed friends. Until, that is, an unfortunate business some years before, a misunderstanding that Gregor had not seen fit to overlook. None of it had been Endor's fault, just circumstances.

His fondness for the classical repertoire had come from Hapshant. Attending the performances at Marisberg's Theatricala was therefore not a drudge for Titus Endor. He would arrive at the great, gilded palace, its high windows lit by a thousand yellow globes, brush the snow off his shoulders, and take a drink in the bar before the start of the performance. The grandees would come and go, in their frock coats and silk scarves, their gowns and tiaras, and he'd watch them professionally. Sometimes his copy book would come out of his coat pocket, and he'd scribble a note or two.

The auditorium was painted crimson, with scarlet upholstery and gold woodwork. When the house lights came down, it was like being seated in the ventricle of a heart, a red cavity pumping with sound. He sat in the stalls, never in the same seat. His folded programme and his rented opera glasses lay in his lap.

Maliko's contact had the use of a private box, to the left of the stage. Endor watched it, night after night, seeing through his glasses the faint brass gleam of the inhabitant's own opera glasses in the dark balcony as they caught the stage light.

He identified the box: number 435. No matter how early he rose from his seat and went to the street door, he never managed to catch the occupants of 435 leaving the Theatricala. This rankled with him, though it was never his fault, just circumstances.

Liebstrum, his interrogator, had been missing for several days. Endor had sent Liebstrum to the palace of records in Zsammstadd to collate material on Maliko and his associates. The man was overdue, probably padding out his task so that he could waste time in the stews of Zsammstadd, on expenses. Endor had thought Liebstrum a promising candidate when he'd first met him, but lately he'd begun to fancy that Liebstrum was an idler, with no appetite for the hard work the ordo demanded. He wondered if he'd ever find himself signing the paperwork approving Liebstrum's advancement to full rosette. He doubted it.

The orchestra began the overture, a great swirl of busy strings and strident horns. Zoramer's *Oration*, one of Hapshant's favourite works. Endor settled back, and glanced from time to time at the private box, noting the occasional flash and glimmer of raised opera glasses, the only hint of habitation.

His head ached. The volume of the music didn't help. His head had ached a lot recently, and Endor put that down to the damnable climate he had been forced to endure in the prosecution of the Maliko case.

The stage was bathed in a limed light from directional lamps. As the red curtains spurred back, the dancers came out, performing in front of a hololithic drop of mountains and coppiced woods, in which dwelt a ruined temple or two, halcyon and timeless.

The woodwind section woke up with vigour, and the gauzy dancers swirled, soft and white as snow flakes. One took his attention immediately. Slender, she soared, faultless in her footwork, her arms expressive and immaculate. Her hair was drawn back tightly in a bun, and her face was as implacable as a death mask, powdered white like ivory, with cheek bones that aspired to the perfection of mathematical symmetry.

Endor moved his glasses away from her powerful, springing thighs, and watched the private box. Light on brass. Other eyes were watching her too.

After the performance, he took himself to a bar on Zeik Street, a bright, sparkling hall of mirrors and crystal chandeliers. It was bustling with patrons from the Theatricala.

‘Your pleasure, master?’ asked the uniformed barman.

‘Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus,’ Endor requested. It had been his favourite tippie since the early days, since that place off Zansiple Street where he and Gregor had gone to wash away the day’s efforts. “The Thirsty Eagle”. Yes, that was it, “The Thirsty Eagle”. Ah, how the memories eroded.

His drink arrived, served on a paper mat. The joiliq was substandard, and too warm. The ice had melted prematurely, and left the citrus wind adrift in a disappointing floe.

He drank it anyway, and ordered another. His headache had eased.

The room was full of loud voices and busy discussion. He thought about calling Liebstrum, but didn’t want to endure the impotence of another recorded message.

He ordered a third drink, and sat back on his stool to survey the room. Almost everyone was male, dressed in dapper evening wear. There was something rambunctious and fraternal about the gathering, like a coterie of men drawn together in some exclusive club. They roared at one another’s jokes, and slapped one another’s backs. The few women present were wives or courtesans, and acted like magnets, pulling crowds of attentive males in around them.

Karoscure needs women, he had noted in his copy book. He had underlined it, and given the note two exclamation points. Like many colony worlds building their economies on mineral wealth, Karoscure had advertised for specialist workers, promising to pay travel costs and set up expenses, in order to attract a professional labour force. Men had flooded in from all parts of the sector, drawn by the attractive salary dividends. The womenfolk of Karoscure had been eclipsed. It was reckoned that males now outnumbered females ten to one in the cities of the oily coast.

Endor missed female company. He’d never had any trouble in that department. In the past, his charisma, his looks and his professional status had all combined to win him the attention of any woman that took his eye. Karoscure was like a siege. There weren’t enough supplies to go around.

He went back to his lodgings. Liebstrum was not there, and hadn’t called. It seemed to Endor that his piles of copy books had been disturbed, and

rearranged. He started to sort through them. Had someone been in his room?

He woke late, bathed and shaved. He saw his reflection in the mirror. We all grow older, he told himself. His face seemed drawn and lined, and there was a sickly pallor to it. Too much winter light, Titus Endor told himself.

His hair had been grey for a while now. He tied it back, out of convenience. There were distinguished scars on his face, the footnotes of a lifetime of battles. The biggest scar was on his leg, out of sight. Endor still wore the jagged saurapt tooth on a black cord around his neck. Gregor had dug it out of him, just after Endor had driven the beast off. Brontotaph, that had been the place, Brontotaph. How long ago now?

They'd been good friends, the best, close like brothers, until the unfortunate business some years before, a misunderstanding that Gregor had not seen fit to overlook. None of it had been Endor's fault, just circumstances.

It was sad. Endor missed his old friend. He wondered what had become of Gregor. Nothing much, he doubted, Gregor had never promised to anything.

Looking in the mirror, Endor toyed with the tooth. According to the lore on Brontotaph, he was damned. Even after death, a saurapt continued to stalk its prey, so the legend went, especially a prey item that had escaped or evaded its jaws. The spirit of the saurapt was out there, tracking him. One day it would find him at last, and strike, and balance the books.

Titus Endor laughed out loud. He saw himself laughing back at him. Plenty of ghosts stalked him, and a bestial reptilian predator was the least of them.

An inquisitor had to be rational about such things.

He wondered where Liebstrum was.

The tooth hung around his neck like a penance.

Titus Endor paid a man to let him into the Theatricala during the day. He prowled the upper galleries, looking for the door to box 435. There was no box 435. The gallery halls were dressed in red velvet carpet and scarlet wallpaper, like aortal tubes. The air smelled of stale lho-sticks. There was a 434 and a 436. His lingering fingers traced the soft red wall, hunting for a secret or concealed door.

Liebstrum had not returned. Annoyed, his mood made worse by a nagging headache, Endor sent a damning report via courier to the ordos. In his lodgings, a glass of joiliq in his hand, he leafed back through his copy books, trying to build some kind of pattern.

Box 435. Gonrad Maliko. The reflected flash of opera glasses in the shadows. The girl. The girl, the slender dancer.

He thought about Gregor from time to time. Endor had always been the bright one, handsome, cunning, bound for glory. Gregor had been a dutiful type, a hard worker, stolid and solid.

‘I wonder where you are now, my old friend?’ Endor asked the empty room. ‘I was always Hapshant’s favourite, and look at the career I’ve built. What have you ever done?’

The unfortunate business still nagged at him. Endor had been put in a tough position, a damn tough position. Several of his prior cases had been placed in review. Details had been distorted and accusations trumped up, all of it so petty-minded and political. He’d had no choice, in the end. When the Ordo Malleus had suggested his transfer, he’d taken it. They’d told him Gregor had been up to no good, and that if Endor helped to set his old friend back on the straight and narrow, the case reviews would be dropped. Endor hadn’t been spying. He had just been keeping an eye on his old friend. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

He went to the next show at the Theatricala, and then to a club, and then became mixed up in a group of Navy noncoms on shore leave. He’d followed them to the next bar, an off-street den, a dance parlour. There were women there, in an abundance at odds with the global statistics, women a man could dance with.

The dance was called the *zendov*, and it was as erotic as it was formal. The dance had evolved, Endor was told, because of the imbalance of men and women, a street dance of the lower classes originally popular in bordellos. *Zendov* allowed a man the opportunity of spending five or ten minutes with a woman, intimately. *Zendov* clubs were the most popular dives on Karoscura.

He took another few drinks, and then he saw her, the girl, the slender dancer. She was standing at the mirror-plated bar, smoking a lho-stick and contemplating her dance card. He hadn’t recognised her at first, because she was wearing a leopardskin cloche and cape, and a gold dress, and had

changed her makeup from the fierce white of the ballet. But her posture took his eye, the balance of her legs, the confidence in the set of her head, and he realised who he was looking at.

He introduced himself, and offered to buy her a drink. She regarded him distantly, and then asked his name. Her accent was thick.

‘Titus,’ he replied.

She marked it on her card. ‘The fifth tune from now, Master Titus,’ she said, adding, ‘amasec on ice.’ Then she walked away, and took the embrace of a noncom for the next dance.

He was perplexed, until he saw the way of it. Most of the women in the bar were dancers from the Theatricala. They supplemented their wages by partner-dancing at the zendov bars, efficiently exploiting Karoscura’s paucity of female companionship. No wonder the clubs were popular. No wonder the clubs paid the girls well for after-hours dancing. They brought the men in, men so hungry for a five-minute intimacy with a woman while the music played, they’d stay all night, waiting their turn, and drink well in the meantime.

When his turn came, she found him at the bar.

‘Master Titus?’

‘What’s your name?’ he asked as she led him onto the dance floor.

She seemed surprised that he should care.

‘Mira,’ she replied.

The music began. Endor had watched the dancers closely, and had learned the steps. His mind worked that way. He took her in a close hold, and turned her about the floor, between other dancing couples. Glittering glow-globes rotated above them, casting down a blizzard of light like snowflakes.

She was close to him, taut, radiating heat. He felt how hard and sinewy her body was, how rigid. She was tiny, but all muscle. She smelled of cologne, but it did not mask the heat of her, or the residue of old ballet makeup, hastily removed, or the slight odour of sweat. She had come straight from the Theatricala, probably changing in a backroom in a hurry.

Sweat, hard limbs, the stale aroma of lho-sticks. He found it intoxicating. Pulled close to her, he noticed she had an old scar along the nape of her neck, just below the hairline.

The tune ended.

‘Thank you, Mira,’ he bowed. ‘Your amasec awaits at the bar.’

‘My card is full. I will come over later.’

He looked disappointed.

‘Where did you learn to dance?’ she asked.

‘Tonight. Here.’

She scowled. ‘I don’t like liars. No one learns to zendov in an evening.’

‘I’m not lying. I watched and learned.’

She narrowed her eyes. They were hard eyes, in a hard face.

‘You’re not very good,’ she said, ‘but you know the steps. Perfectly, in fact. You’re too rigid, though. Your shoulders are too tight.’

He bowed again. ‘I’ll remember that. Perhaps you might educate me in the finer points of the dance?’

‘Sorry, my card is full.’

‘No room, not even at the end of the night?’

The music had begun again. A Navy officer was waiting for her, impatient anger in his face.

‘Amasec,’ she said. ‘Perhaps, at the end of the night.’

In the zendov clubs, the end of the night meant dawn. The queues of men danced the girls into exhaustion. Heading from the bar to find the washroom, Endor saw three or four shoeless girls in a back hall, smoking lho-sticks and dabbing at bleeding heels and swollen toes.

He went out into the snow, and searched for a public vox-station. He called Liebstrum’s number, and got the message service.

‘Where are you?’ he shouted. ‘Where are you?’

Two glasses sat on the bar. Joiliq in one, diluted with slowly melting ice, and amasec in the other. It was four-thirty.

‘Master Titan?’

‘Titus,’ he corrected, looking around. What he saw made him forget the throbbing in his temples. ‘My name is Titus.’

The girl nodded. ‘Sorry. This for me?’

He smiled. She took up the amasec and sipped.

‘A last dance, then, yes?’ she asked.

‘I’ve been waiting.’

There was a look in her eyes that told him how much she despised the men who waited to dance with her.

She led him to the floor. Her body was as hard as before, but now she was cold. There was no heat in her. The fragrance of lho-smoke and sweat

had dulled to a thin, unhealthy smell.

‘Loosen your shoulders,’ she said, as the music began. ‘Turn your head. No, too much. Turn it like this. And swing out. Yes. And back and back.’

‘Am I getting it?’ he asked. He felt like he was dancing with a corpse.

‘Your footwork is fine. Excellent, actually. Your back is still a little stiff. Turn out, turn out, that’s it.’

‘You’re a good teacher.’

‘I do what I’m paid to do, sir.’

‘You’re tired.’

‘Every day is a long day,’ she whispered, her head against his chest. She looked up at him sharply. ‘Please don’t tell the bosses I said that. They’ll dock my pay.’

‘I won’t,’ he smiled, rotating her neatly. ‘I know how long your day’s been. I was at the Theatricala. You are a fine dancer.’

‘This pays better than the classical shit,’ she said. She stared up at him as they spun and re-addressed. ‘Have you been following me?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I just came here and saw you.’

‘And learned the zendov.’

He chuckled. ‘Something like that. Men must follow women all the time on this world. There are so few of you.’

‘It does become a problem,’ she admitted.

‘So they follow you? Watch you?’

‘I suppose they do,’ said Mira.

‘Who watches you?’ he asked.

‘You do,’ she said, ‘and everyone else.’

They swung and re-addressed, then promenaded again.

‘How did you get the scar?’ he asked.

She flinched. ‘I hate it when men notice that.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Will you tell me how you got it?’

‘I got it years ago. That’s all I want to say about it.’

He nodded, spinning her. ‘I’m sorry I asked. We all have our scars.’

‘Isn’t that the truth?’ she agreed.

The number ended. He stepped back, and looked at her.

‘Please, please don’t ask me for another,’ she said quietly.

‘A last drink, then?’

‘I’m dead on my feet, Master Titus.’

‘Might I be first on your card tomorrow, then?’

‘It doesn’t work that way. Come along tomorrow, and we’ll dance again.’

She walked away. The band was packing up. Endor went to the bar, where the barman was washing the last of the glasses.

‘Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus,’ Endor requested.

The barman sighed, and fixed the drink. When Endor looked around, the girl had vanished.

It was light when he got back to his residentiary. Snow was fluttering down out of a sky that was white and opaque. He tossed his copy book onto the desk, took off his jacket and fell down on his bed.

He dreamt of Hapshant. There were worms coming out of his tear ducts. Endor tried to wipe them away. Gregor shouted at him, telling him he was a fool. Hapshant went into spasms, his heels kicking on the hardwood floor.

The knocking persisted. It was suddenly late in the afternoon. Endor sat up, fully clothed. The knocking came again, not Hapshant’s heels at all.

He went to the door, and opened it.

Liebstrum stared at him.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Well, hello to you too,’ replied Endor.

Liebstrum pushed past him into the room. ‘Throne of Terra, Titus. Why? Why do you keep doing this?’

‘Doing what, exactly?’

‘Calling me. Calling me with these messages and—’

‘Where have you been?’ Endor asked.

Liebstrum turned and looked at him. ‘You’ve forgotten again, haven’t you?’

‘Forgotten what? Interrogator, I believe you have been singularly derelict in your duties these last few weeks. I’m afraid I’ve been forced to send a report of admonition to the ordos and—’

‘Not again. Again with this,’ Liebstrum sighed.

‘Again with what, interrogator?’

Liebstrum pulled out his rosette. ‘It’s inquisitor, Titus. *Inquisitor*.’

‘Since when?’

‘Four years ago, on Hesperus. You elected me yourself. Don’t you remember?’

Endor frowned. 'No, I don't.'

Liebstrum sat down on the bed. 'Throne, Titus, you have to stop doing this to me.'

'I don't follow.'

Liebstrum looked up at him sadly. 'What are you doing here?'

'Hunting Gonrad Maliko. You know that. Keep up.'

'We captured Gonrad Maliko five years ago. He's serving life in the penal colony on Izzakos. Don't you remember?'

Endor paused. He wandered over to his desk, and poured the last dregs of a bottle of joiliq into a dirty glass. 'No, no, I don't remember that. Not at all.'

'Oh, Titus,' Liebstrum muttered.

'Maliko is loose. He's here, and he's loose. I have a lead, a girl in the Theatricala, and box four-three-five—'

'Stop it! Stop it now!'

'Liebstrum?'

Liebstrum rose from the bed, and approached Endor.

'Show me your rosette,' he said.

Endor took a swig of his drink, and pulled his wallet out of his pocket.

'Look. Do you see, Titus?' Liebstrum asked, opening the leather wallet. 'There's no rosette in there. You were disavowed, three years ago. They took your warrant away. You're not an inquisitor any more.'

'Of course I am,' said Titus Endor, ignoring the bald patch in the wallet where his rosette had once been sewn in. 'I'm operating under Special Circumstances.'

Liebstrum shook his head sadly. 'Titus, I've tried to help you, Throne knows, but you've got to stop calling me. You've got to stop pretending.'

'Pretending? How dare you!'

Liebstrum walked towards the door. 'This is the last time I come running, you understand? The very last time.'

'No, I don't understand. I am affronted by your manner, interrogator. Maliko is still out there.'

Liebstrum turned to look back one last time. 'No, Titus, he really isn't.'

Endor went to the park in the last of the afternoon. Black trees and blacker ironwork benches stood up out of a skim of wet snow. He wondered how Maliko had got to Liebstrum. What did he have on him? He sat on a bench, and began to draft a report in his copy book, a report exposing Liebstrum's

connections to the criminal, and recommending his immediate censure and suspension. But the bench was cold and damp, and it soaked his clothes, and gave him a headache, so he walked to a local cafe, and ordered a pot of chocolate and a thimble of amasec.

The light was going out of the sky. As the snow fell, it almost seemed as if the pale sky was shedding in little white flakes, leaving a dark undercoat behind.

Endor went back to the zendov club early, before the Theatricala turned out, and waited for the girl, but she never showed. He hung around until it was quite late, and then started asking questions. The other dancers, the girls, were reticent. They'd learned that you didn't give out personal details to men who loitered at the clubs.

Finally, Endor snagged a junior barman who, for rather too many crowns, said he was prepared to slip into the manager's office and take a look at the girl's contact address in the club ledger.

Endor met him out the back of the dance club just after one in the morning, and exchanged the cash for a slip of paper.

Mira Zaleed, 870 Arbogan.

He considered leaving it until the morning, but he was restless, so he bought a quart of amasec at a tavern on Oroshbyli Street, and rode the maglev to Corso Saint Helk in the north of the city. From the station, it was a long walk up the rockcrete walkways to the hab blocks: Solingen, Zarbos, Arbogan.

The stairwells were unlit, and choked with trash. A domestic quarrel was raging on the fifth floor, and the residents of other habs were yelling out protests at the noise. Just before he located 870, it occurred to him that 870 was twice 435.

Titus Endor stood in the gloomy hallway, listening to the racket of someone else's private life disintegrating, and wondered if the numbers were significant. Numbers could be dangerous. A life of study and an eventful career had shown him that. Certain numbers, usually abstract mathematical constructs, possessed power. He'd heard of several cases where cogitators had been corrupted by warped numbers, and he'd been party to another case, years ago, when some old fool had mistakenly believed he'd uncovered the Number of Ruin. He and Gregor had handled it, and it had come to nothing, but they'd taken it seriously. He couldn't remember the old fool's name now, some dusty scribe, but he remembered

the case. They'd been interrogators then, him and Gregor, just starting out. They'd been friends.

An age ago, in another life.

His mind had wandered. He blinked, and wondered how long he'd been standing in the dim passageway outside 870 Arbogan. The domestic had ended, and the night was still. From somewhere, he heard the frail sound of zendov music, playing on an old voxcordian.

He decided to steady his nerves with a sip of the quart of amasec, and discovered that the bottle was half-empty already.

He knocked on the door.

There was no answer. Someone in a neighbouring flat cried out, the half-awake mew of the nightmared.

He knocked again.

'Mira Zaleed?' he called.

The door was baffled shempwood in an iron frame, with double deadbolts and a triple-tumbler, Blaum et Cie safety lock. The lock had been retrofitted into the door, an expensive piece of kit for such a low-rent hab. He rummaged in his trouser pocket, and found his anykey. The slim blade extended from the grip, slipped into the lock, and muttered as it explored the permutations.

He waited. One murmur more, and the anykey turned. The lock sprung with a clatter of rotating drums, and the deadbolts unlatched.

He put the anykey back in his pocket and pushed the door open with his toe.

'Mira?'

The squalid apartment was cold and dark. The windows of the main room, overlooking the hab's cinderblock courtyard, had been left open, and snow damp had blown in like wet breath. The drapes were lank and partly stiff with frost. He snapped on a pair of latex gloves, and clicked the light switch. An overhead light bar woke up, lazy and slow. Frizzy purple mould had colonised the cups and plates left on the little dining table. A chair had been overturned on the bare floor. On the wall, faded picts of laughing friends and solemn family gatherings jostled with playbills and programmes from Theatricalas from half a dozen worlds like Gudrun, Eustis Majoris, Brontotaph and Ligeria.

The bedroom was vacant. A single bed, crumpled with use, had been pushed against the wall, and yellow markings, made in chalk, had been

scribed on the exposed floor space. The marks were arrows, circling and crossing, and numbers. 4, 3, 5 and then an 8, a 7, a 0. To the left, 87, the digits stacked as a column. 5, Endor thought, went into 435 87 times.

He stepped over the marks, and took out his little chrome picter. He took four or five shots of the markings.

He felt cold on his back, a shiver. In the little closet, packed tight, were dozens of dance costumes, all gauze and lace. They smelled, very faintly, of sweat and lho-smoke. He reached in, and rifled through shoes and hats at the back of the closet space. His hand closed on something: a book.

He drew it out.

It was an unauthorised edition of *Stratified Eating Customs In The Halo Star* Sub-Races, by Soloman Tarsh. Tarsh was a pen name Maliko had used to publish his most scandalous theories. Endor smiled. Like the tumbling mechanism of a Blaum et Cie safety lock, things were falling into place. He bagged the book in a plastek evidence sheath, and put it in his pocket. Then, he rootled some more, and found a string of cultured pearls, a small jewellery box, and a fetish made of bent wire and feathers.

He bagged them all.

The kitchen was a dank mess of grime and grease, stacked with culture-bearing crockery. He went to the bathroom.

Violent death marked the small, tiled room. Blood had extravagantly stippled the walls and dried into black scabs, and it had pooled in the enamel tub, separating into dark sediment and glassy surface plasma. From the spray travel and the splash vectors, Endor approximated a frenzied attack, multiple stabs with a short, double-edged blade. There was no shower curtain, and the rings on the rail were broken and buckled. *The perp wrapped the body in the curtain*, he deduced.

‘Are you dead, Mira?’ he asked out loud. It was unlikely. The kill scene was a week old, and he’d danced with her just the night before.

‘Who’s in there?’ a voice called. Endor stiffened. ‘Come on out, unless it’s you, Mira.’

The voice was sixty years old, and carrying twenty or thirty kilos too much weight. Endor unclipped his shoulder holster so his weapon was in grab range, and came out of the bathroom. A torch beam shone in his face.

‘This had better be good,’ said the sixty-year-old, overweight voice.

‘Get the light out of my eyes, please,’ said Endor.

The beam swung away, revealing a fat old man aiming a combat shotgun. The barrels of the weapon were pointing directly at Endor. The old man was wearing pyjama bottoms and unlaced, scuffed army boots. His belly stretched his stained vest. Old Guard insignia, the stitching worn, decorated his fatigue jacket.

‘Who are you?’ Endor asked.

‘This says I get to ask the questions,’ the old man replied, settling his shotgun. ‘Who are you?’

‘A friend of Mira’s.’

The old man snorted. ‘That’s what they all say. They don’t all get in, though.’

‘She gave me a key.’

‘Why would she do that?’ the old man asked.

‘We’re friends,’ said Endor.

‘Round and round we go,’ said the old man. ‘Give me a good reason not to blast your lungs out through your spine.’

Endor nodded. ‘I’m going to reach into my jacket, all right? I’m going to show you my credentials.’

‘Slow as you like,’ the old man replied.

Endor reached into his coat, forced himself to ignore the invitation of his gun, and flipped out his wallet.

‘Titus Endor, Ordo Malleus. I’m an inquisitor operating under Special Circumstances.’

The old man’s eyes widened. He lifted the shotgun away from Endor.

‘I beg your forgiveness, sir!’ he stammered.

Endor flipped the wallet away.

‘It’s no trouble. You are?’

‘Nute Jerimo, from eight-six-eight, just down the hall. I...’ the old man cleared his throat, ‘... I’m kind of the unofficial super on this floor. The residents like me to keep an eye on things, keep the place safe, you understand?’

‘You’re ex-mil?’

‘Karoscura Seventh, and proud of it. Mustered out eighteen years ago.’

‘You got a licence for that riotgun, Jerimo?’ Endor asked.

The old man shrugged.

‘It kind of followed me home from the wars, sir,’ he replied.

‘You keep the peace here, and watch over your neighbours. I’m not going to report you,’ said Endor.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Tell me about Mira.’

Jerimo shook his head. ‘Lovely girl, she is. A dancer. Moved in nine months back, keeps herself to herself. Always polite. Last spring, on my wife’s birthday, she gave us tickets to a performance at the Theatricala. A present, you see? What a night! I’d never have been able to treat my wife so well, not on my pension.’

‘She’s a good girl.’

‘She is that. Is she in trouble, sir? Is Mira in some sort of trouble?’

‘That’s what I’m trying to find out,’ Endor replied. ‘When did you last see her?’

The old man thought about that. ‘A week ago, maybe nine days. It was early. She was just coming in when I was going out to tend the boiler. It won’t fire the heating for this block unless someone cranks it, and so me, being me, goes downstairs and—’

‘She was just coming in?’

‘She always comes in late, sometimes with gentleman callers. Dawn or after.’

‘That was the last time you saw her?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Jerimo replied.

‘Go home, go to bed,’ said Endor. ‘I’ll lock up here.’

The old man shuffled off, taking his shotgun with him.

Endor took a last look around the apartment, and switched off the light.

He could smell Maliko.

Back in his room in the residentiary, in the small hours, Endor poured himself the last of the amasec. Sipping, he took the items he’d retrieved from Mira’s hab, and laid them out on his desk. The book, the fetish, the jewellery box, the pearls.

He unbagged the jewellery box, and opened it with his anykey. The trays inside were dusty and empty. The only thing in it was a pendant, a gold chain fastened to a small, curved tooth. Titus Endor fingered the jagged tooth that hung around his neck.

Then he printed out the picts he’d taken of the markings on the floor, and studied them.

When he woke up, the prints were scattered across his chest.

He had slept badly. A recurring dream of death had stalked him. A supple ballet dancer with worms coming out of her eyes. A lizard carnivore, snuffling through the dark.

‘Wake up,’ he told himself.

He felt vile. He washed and dressed, and went to a dining house that was fifteen minutes away from the end of breakfast service. He ordered caffeine, poached eggs, black bread and a slice of the local sausage. He took the book out of his pocket, and flipped through it as he waited for his order to arrive.

Stratified Eating Customs In The Halo Star Sub-Races, by Soloman Tarsh. It had been vanity-printed on low-quality paper. Someone had annotated the well-thumbed pages. Passages were underlined, and notes dotted the margins. Why would a dancer like Mira Zaleed own a copy of a specialist tract like this?

One section of the book had been especially heavily annotated. It was titled ‘The Eaters and the Eaten’, and it dealt with primitive customs relating to human communities and their local predators. Some hunter clans in the wilderness worlds of the Halo Stars ritually ate the flesh of apex predators in the belief that this would both proof them against predation and invest them with the traits of the killer creatures. On Salique, tribesmen drank the blood of local crocodilians so as to share their cunning. On Gudrun, in ages past, the powdered teeth and genitals of the giant carnodon were believed to imbue the ingester with feral potency. It was a recurring theme. Wherever man inhabited a world where he was in competition with a significant apex predator, rituals of devouring evolved. Eat what would otherwise eat you, and you would be magically protected. Hunt and consume what you fear will hunt and consume you, and you would be proofed against its fanged jaws.

This was nothing new to Titus Endor. His painful experiences on Brontotaph as an interrogator had taught him much about these curious beliefs. After his clash with the saurapt, an encounter he’d never care to repeat, the local tribes had treated him with the utmost respect. He had been ‘in the jaws’ and he had survived. This made him special in their eyes, as if some curious supernatural relationship had been forged between man and predator. They were bound together, both eaters, both eaten. The tribesmen had urged Endor to hunt down the saurapt, kill it and ingest its flesh, so as to become master of the compact.

Endor had laughed this off and refused. The old superstitions were ridiculous. 'But the saurapt will now stalk you forever,' the tribesmen had warned, 'to the end of your days, when it will claim you at last and finish its bite.'

Finish its bite. Quite a phrase. It had made Hapshant laugh. Endor had relished the notion of a predator's bite that took years, decades perhaps, to close entirely.

Many notes, most of them hard to decipher, appended the passages dealing with such traditions. Brontotaph was mentioned. Certain charms and prophylactic rituals were described, whereby sacrifices could be made to ward off the stalking killer. Fresh blood and surrogate victims could be offered up to stall the attentions of invisible beasts.

Endor wondered about the tooth he'd found in Mira Zaleed's jewellery box.

'Are you Endor?'

Titus looked up from his eggs. It took him a moment to recognise the barman from the zendov club.

'What can I do for you?' he asked.

'May I?' the barman asked, indicating the other chair.

'Please.'

The barman sat down. He was in casual clothes, a white shirt under a striped coat. Endor imagined the man's formal wear was being pressed somewhere in a backstreet laundry.

'Master Endor,' the barman began, 'Mira wants you to know that—'

Endor held up his fork. 'I don't talk to men unless I know their names. Especially over breakfast.'

The barman cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable.

'My name is Jeg Stannis, sir,' he said.

'And I'm Titus Endor. See, that wasn't so hard. You were saying?'

'Mira wants you to know that you can't follow her any more.'

'Does she?'

'You went to her hab last night.'

'Maybe I did.'

'She knows you were there.'

'And where is she?'

Stannis shrugged. 'She wants to stay well away from you. She asked me to come and deliver this message, as a favour to her.'

‘I’ll go where I like, Master Stannis.’

‘The club has rules, sir,’ Stannis said. ‘The girls have to be protected from—’

‘From what?’

‘Predators,’ said Stannis.

Endor bit the corner off a slice of black bread. ‘I’m no predator, I assure you.’

‘You went to her home, uninvited, and let yourself in.’

Endor sighed.

‘The club has rules,’ the barman repeated. ‘Fraternisation with guests is strictly—’

‘It happens all the time, Master Stannis,’ said Endor. ‘Please, we’re both adults. Most of the dancers at your club are already supplementing their income from day jobs and Theatricala work. Let’s not be naive. They add to their wages in other ways too. Women are a rare commodity on Karoscura.’

The barman’s face darkened. ‘Leave her alone.’

‘Or what?’ Endor smiled.

‘Or things will go badly for you.’

Endor nodded. ‘We’ll see. Tell me this, Master Stannis...’ He pulled a pict from his coat and set it on the white cloth. ‘What does this mean?’

Stannis looked down at the print. It was a shot of the yellow chalk marks on the floor of Mira Zaleed’s bedroom.

‘They’re practice marks,’ he said. ‘Dance steps. The girls often draw out the turns and steps.’

Endor picked up the print and looked at it. ‘Are they really? I’m not convinced. The numbers—’

‘Beat counts.’

‘Who did she kill in her bathroom, Master Stannis?’

The barman got up. ‘Kill? I think there must be something wrong with your head, mister. You leave her alone, you hear me?’

‘I hear what you’re saying,’ Endor nodded.

After breakfast, Endor stopped at a street bar on Kalyope and took an amasec against the cold. Sleet was coming down, brittle and wet. He read some more of the book. Maliko, Throne damn him, had a way with words.

Endor looked up. Across the street, through the veil of sleet, he saw a man watching him, a tall, thin man, dressed in sober black, with a high black hat.

Endor looked away to pay the bill. When he got up, the thin man in the tall black hat had vanished.

‘How much?’ Endor asked.

‘Four crowns,’ the adept replied.

‘To turn it around by tonight?’

‘Twenty crowns,’ the adept replied.

Endor showed him his rosette, but the adept didn’t seem all that impressed.

‘Twenty crowns,’ he repeated.

Endor paid him the money, and handed him Mira’s tooth. ‘Typed, by tonight, no excuses.’

The adept nodded.

Endor left the backstreet alchemist’s, and trudged up into the cold. The sleet had stiffened into snow, and it was belting along the thoroughfare in waves. He pulled up the collar of his coat, and walked into it, head down.

His route took him back past the Theatricala, unlit and drab in the daylight. He went in. Cleaners were mopping the marble floors, and turning out the waste bins.

‘We’re closed,’ a man said, coming forward to meet Endor. ‘The box office opens at six.’

Endor looked the man up and down.

‘My name is Endor, and I’m an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos,’ he said. He didn’t bother with his badge this time. It seemed to have lost its impact.

‘My pardon, sir,’ the man said.

‘Do I know you?’ asked Endor.

‘I don’t think so, sir.’

The man was tall and skinny.

‘Do you own a very tall black hat?’ Endor asked.

‘No, I don’t, sir.’

‘You have a dancer here, by the name of Mira Zaleed. I would like to inspect her dressing room.’

‘We don’t do that, sir,’ said the man.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ smiled Endor. ‘I thought I’d explained that I was an inquisitor.’

‘This is where they all change,’ the man said. Endor stepped into the room, and turned on the light. The man waited by the door.

The room was long and low, flanked with grubby mirrors. Piles of dirty laundry heaped the baskets behind the door. Floaty white dresses hung on a rail. On the work surfaces, pins and reels of thread and thimbles lay beside pots of greasepaint and waxy sticks of rouge and base white. The room stank of greasy makeup, sweat and smoke.

‘Her station?’ asked Endor.

‘I have no idea, inquisitor,’ the man said.

‘None at all?’

‘Maybe to the left there, third mirror along. It’s very busy in here at night.’

Endor sat down in the seat indicated, and looked at himself in the smeared mirror. He was overpowered by the smell of stale perfume. Spent lho-sticks choked a glass near his left hand. The words ‘Good luck Mira XXX Lilo’ were written in lip rouge in the lower right-hand corner of the mirror.

Endor opened the small drawer under the mirror. It was full of blood. He shut it again, hastily, trying not to slosh anything out onto his lap.

‘Could I have a moment?’ he asked.

‘I’m not really allowed—’ the man began.

‘Inquisitor, inquisitor,’ Endor snarled.

‘I’ll be outside,’ the man said, and closed the door behind him.

Gently, Endor slid the drawer open again. It wasn’t full of blood at all. It was full of dark rose petals. He laughed at himself. The rose petals were as black and red as the halls of the Theatricala. He dipped his hand in and slid it around. The petals were as soft and cold as snow flakes or random clues.

He took out the knife. It was double-sided and stained. He sniffed it. Blood. From the bathroom in 870 Arbogan, no doubt. He leant back into the seat, and took out the pict. Dance steps? Practice marks? Surely nothing so innocent.

Endor decided he had to get Liebstrum working on the Number of Ruin. He needed proper information. The Number of Ruin wasn’t something one took lightly. There had been a case, years back, an old fool...

Endor wondered where Liebstrum was. He hadn’t seen his interrogator in days.

He put his hand back into the petals, and found a card, a business card. On one side, it read ‘Cloten and Sons, Funerary Needs and Final Rituals’. There was a vox number and a street address.

On the other side, handwritten, was 'Master Titus, you need to conclude your business with these men. Order number 87.' 435, Endor thought, was divisible by 87 five times.

'Hello?' Endor called out.

The man poked his head around the dressing room door. 'Sir?'

'What are the chances of a man getting a drink?' Endor asked.

Cloten and Sons occupied a grim ouslite building at the end of Limnal Street. Polished long-bodied hearses sat in the snowy yard. A brass bell tinkled as Endor went in.

'Can I be of assistance to you, sir?' asked a young, pudgy man in mourning weeds.

'No, you can't,' Endor replied, 'but he can.' He pointed at the tall, slender man at the back of the musty little shop, a place of dark velvet drapes and samphorwood.

'Master Cloten?' the young man called. 'For you, sir.'

Master Cloten walked over to Endor. He was no longer wearing the tall back hat, but he was unmistakeable. His face was hard and pale and sinewy, the face a man wore when he had spent his life dealing with grief.

'How may I help you, sir?' he asked.

'Order number 87,' Endor replied.

The man went to his heavy ledger, and heaved it open, but Endor knew he already knew the details.

'Ah, indeed. Already fully paid. A nalwood coffin, and a confirmed site in the municipal yard. Headstone already inscribed. Eighteen paid mourners. We have two of our most saddest-faced boys ready, sir, a horse-drawn carriage. Full wreathes. Two hymns already chosen and applied. The choir of the Theatricala will attend and sing them. Well, everything looks in order.'

'Good,' said Endor, 'and it's all paid for?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I saw you in the street this morning,' said Endor.

'Quite probably, sir,' the slender man agreed. 'Death visits all the time. It stalks us, so to say.'

'I've heard that,' Endor smiled.

'And it's never subtle,' the slender man said. 'It strikes where it wants. Such is the way of the cosmos.'

‘Indeed. Well, the ceremony seems well catered, and I am thankful for that. I knew him well.’ Endor looked at the slender man for a reaction. None came. ‘A splendid send-off. These are the hymns?’

‘They are.’

Endor studied the sheets. ‘I had wanted to make a contribution towards costs,’ he said. ‘As I told you, I knew him well.’

‘Mistress Zaleed has already paid for everything,’ the slender man said.

‘Has she? Has she?’ Endor murmured. ‘May I see the inscription?’

The slender man passed him a pict of the headstone.

‘Such a lamentable loss,’ the slender man said. ‘To be killed by a monster like that. Throne, I didn’t know there were any predators left on Karoscura, not like that. Imagine.’

‘Indeed,’ said Endor.

He looked at the pict. His own name was on the headstone.

The backstreet alchemist’s had shut up for the night. In the swirling snow, he hammered on the door until the adept unlocked it.

‘Tonight!’ Endor spat. ‘Tonight, you said!’

‘You’re late,’ the adept replied.

‘Just tell me what you found,’ Endor snapped. He felt peculiar, and in no mood for nonsense.

‘I ground it down. It’s a saurapt tooth, just as you thought, from Brontotaph.’

Endor joined the queue at the doors of the Theatricala. The overture was pumping out already, the windows glowing with gold light.

‘Anywhere in the circle,’ he told the girl in the box office, pushing crowns at her as he waited for his ticket.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ she asked.

‘I’m fine,’ he replied.

He hired glasses, bought a programme and a glass of joiliq, and hurried to his seat.

The ruddy auditorium pulsed like a box of flesh, red and dark, pumping with movement. He took his seat after a few thank yous and excuse mes.

He swung his glasses up. Yes, there in 435, the glint of opera glasses. I have you now, Maliko, he thought.

The overture ended. The curtains drew back, and the dancers mounted the stage. There she was, perfect and poised. Where had she been hiding?

Endor's body started to twist and turn, dancing the zendov in his seat.

'Will you stop that?' complained the woman beside him.

'Sorry,' said Endor, sitting still and sipping his drink.

He looked up at the box, and saw the glint of brass and glass again. 435.
435.

Of course, there was no box 435.

Liebstrum sat down beside him.

'Ah, there you are,' Endor smiled. 'Just in time.'

Liebstrum looked at him strangely.

'I've been calling you, you know?' said Endor.

'I know,' Liebstrum sighed.

'Where have you been?'

'Busy. Look, sir—'

'Oh, hush! You can't talk through this. It's beautiful. Watch them dance.
Watch her.'

'Sir, I... sir... the ordos sent me, sir,' said Liebstrum. 'I was concerned, sir. Your calls, and everything. I had them run some tests on your last routine clinical. They wanted you to know. I'm so sorry, I would never wish this on you, sir.'

'Wish what? For Throne's sake, watch her!' Endor craned forwards, and looked through his opera glasses. They caught the light.

'Sir?'

'What?'

'Sir, the worms, sir, the cerebral worms. They think you may have been infected years ago, perhaps by Hapshant.'

'He was a real character.'

'Sir, your mind is being eaten up. Dementia, sir.'

'Don't be silly, Liebstrum. By the way, where the hell have you been?'

'Sir, I think it would be best if you came with me now. I have summoned doctors. They can make your last weeks comfortable.'

Endor lowered his opera glasses.

'Is this some kind of trick?' he asked.

'No, sir,' replied Liebstrum.

'Listen to me, Liebstrum, she's got me. It was very canny of her. There's a saurapt stalking her too.'

'A what, sir?'

‘A saurapt. She fended it off, made the rituals. She transplanted her curse onto me, you see?’

‘No, not really, sir.’

‘Oh yes you do!’ cried Endor. He reached for his glass, but it was empty. ‘I smelt the same, don’t you see? I was *already* a target. She performed the rituals and switched her predator after me. I’m her blood sacrifice. I suppose it was easy, given that I’d already got the curse on me.’

‘Sir, the doctors are waiting. They will look after you.’

‘Liebstrum? Liebstrum?’ Endor called. He dropped his opera glasses. Liebstrum had vanished. Below him, the performance was continuing. He was in a box. He turned around, and saw the number on the door.

435.

But there was no box 435.

He felt peculiar. His head ached worse than ever. He wanted a drink, something to dull the pain. Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus. His hands were numb. Where was Liebstrum? Hadn’t he just been talking to Liebstrum?

The performance ended with a flourish, and the Theatricala exploded with applause.

It was all over now. Endor smiled. He realised it wasn’t his fault. Just circumstances.

Out of the red darkness behind him, something loomed and finished its bite.

THE CURIOSITY

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He was, it is fair to say, already weary of Gershom when the curiosity came to light. Seven years is a long time in any man's career, seven years living and working in grubby tenements, backwater hostels and frontier habs all over the planet. Long enough to feel like a native, and certainly to look like one, although he had been born forty-two years and many million AU distant. The patched worsted suit with shiny, calloused elbows, the slate-grey weathercoat, fingerless leather gloves, wire-framed spectacles, the skin of his face etiolated from too many short, wintry days, his thin hair unnaturally black from a biweekly chemical treatment that he purchased and applied himself.

This insipid and forlorn figure stared at his reflection in the smoked glass screen of the demograph booth.

'Present papers. State name and occupation,' the indistinct form behind the screen said. As he spoke, the words appeared in glowing, block-capital holos on the glass.

He put his crumpled documents into the metal drawer below the screen and it gobbled them away with an un-oiled clatter. Hunching low, he aimed his mouth helpfully at the vox-grille, and said, 'Valentin Drusher, magos biologists.'

'Purpose of travel?' the voice said, subtitled as before.

'I am a magos biologists, as I said. You'll see I have a permit for travel to Outer Udar stamped by the office of the Lord Governor. He is my patron.'

The shape behind the tinted glass panel paused, and then the legend 'please wait' appeared on the screen. Doing as he was told, Drusher stood back, rubbing his hands together briskly to chafe warmth into them. It was a miserably early morning in the last few days of autumn and the terminal was vacant. Outside, it was not yet light; the sky was a patchy blue, the colour of a Tarkoni tarkonil's winter plumage, and the orange glare of

sodium lamps reflected in the puddles on the rain-slicked concourse. Drusher studied the reflections, and they reminded him of the fluorescent banding on the abdomen of the southern latitude glowmoth, *Lumenis gershomi*.

The air held the bitter foretaste of another hard Gershom winter closing in. He consoled himself with the thought that he would be long gone before winter came. Just a few more days to tidy up this annoying loose end, and then he would be done at last.

The drawer slot clacked open again, his refolded papers laid inside.

‘Proceed,’ said the voice.

Drusher retrieved his papers, gathered up his bags and equipment cases, and walked into the boarding yard to find himself a seat on the interprovince coach.

It wasn’t hard. The vehicle, a converted military gref-carrier from the Peninsula, was all but empty. An old woman in a purple shawl sat alone, fingering rosary beads as she read from a dog-eared devotional chapbook. A young mother, hard-faced and tired, occupied another bench seat, her two small children gathered up in her skirts. A rough-faced agri-worker in leather overalls nodded, half-asleep, one arm protectively around the baskets of live, clucking poultry he shared his seat with. His hound, lean and grinning, prowled the aisle. Two young men, identical twins, sat side by side, motionlessly intent. Drusher set himself down near the front of the cabin, far away from anyone else. He shoed the dog away when it came sniffing at his bags.

A hooter sounded, waking the agri-worker briefly. The coach’s big, caged props began to turn and beat, and the patched rubber skirts of the bulky ground-effect vehicle began to swell out. Drusher felt them drunkenly rise up. One of the little children laughed out in glee at the bobbing motion as the vehicle picked up speed.

Then they were out of the city terminal and roaring up to the state highway, fuming spray into the gloomy dawn.

Outer Udar, the most western and – many said – the most heathen of Gershom’s provinces, lay far beyond the Tartred Mountains, forty hours away. For the first hour or two, he worked on his notes, refining technical descriptions on his data-slate. Such polish was simply cosmetic. He’d been over it a hundred times, and the taxonomy would have been published as complete by now. Complete but for the curiosity.

He put his slate aside, and took the crumpled voxgram from his pocket, hoping yet again that it was a mistake.

Seven years! Seven damn years of rigorous work. To miss a sub-form of tick-fly, a variant weevil, even a divergent rodentae, well that would just be the way of things. Even, he considered, some class of grazer, if it was localised and sufficiently shy in its habits.

But an apex predator? Surely, surely not. Any systematic taxonomy identified all apex predators in the initial phase of preparation by dint of the fact they were the most obvious of any world's creatures.

No, it was a mistake. The curiosity in Outer Udar was an error. He'd stake his reputation on that.

The rolling motion of the gref-coach began to lull him. He fell asleep, dreaming of the characterising mouthparts of filter snakes, the distinguishing feather-palps of lowland locustae, and the bold, striated beaks of peninsula huskpeckers.

He woke to the sound of infant laughter. The coach was stationary, and sleet was dashing against the grey windows. Blinking, he sat up, and repositioned his dislodged spectacles on his nose. At his feet, the two children had his sketchbooks laid open and were giggling as they surveyed the hand-painted images of beasts and fowls.

'Please,' he said, 'please be careful with those.'

The children looked up at him.

'Zoo books,' said one.

'Yes,' he replied, taking the sketchbooks away from their grubby hands and closing them.

'Why have you got zoo books?'

'I make zoo books,' he said.

They thought about this. Their simple grasp of professional careers did not reach so far. One nudged the other.

'Are you going to put the beast in your zoo books?' the nudged one asked.

'The beast?' he asked. 'Which beast?'

'The hill beast. It has teeth.'

'Great large teeth.'

'It eats men up.'

'And swine.'

'And swine. With its great large teeth. It has no eyes.'

‘Come away!’ their mother called, and the two children scurried back down the aisle to her.

Drusher looked around the cabin. It was just as he had last seen it. The agri-worker continued to snooze; the old woman was still reading. The only change was the twins, who now sat facing one another, like a mirror.

The cabin door thumped open and flakes of sleet billowed in around several newcomers. A black-robed demograph servitor, its face a cluster of slack tubes beneath augmented compound eyes. A short-haired woman in a leather bodyglove and fur coat, carrying a brown paper parcel. Another agri-worker, his face chilblained, fighting to keep his long-haired terrier from snapping at the roaming hound. A matronly progenium school teacher in a long grey dress. The short-haired woman helped the matron with her luggage.

‘Leofrik! This is Leofrik!’ the servitor called as he walked the cabin. ‘Present your papers!’

Each voyager offered up his or her documents for the servitor to scan. Gershom was very particular about its indigents, the side effect of being so close to a warzone. The Departmento Demographicae maintained a vigilant watch on the planet’s human traffic.

The servitor, waste spittle drooling from its mouth tubes, took a long time studying Drusher’s papers.

‘Magos biologis?’

‘Yes.’

‘Reason for travel?’

‘I went through all this at the terminal this morning.’

‘Reason for travel?’

Drusher sighed. ‘Seven years ago, I was commissioned by the Lord Governor of Gershom to draw up a comprehensive taxonomy of the planet’s fauna. It is all but complete. However, a curiosity has appeared in Outer Udar and I am travelling there to examine it.’

Drusher wanted to go on, to talk about the extended deadlines he had been forced to request, the increasingly reluctant project funding that had obliged him to take the overland coach instead of a chartered flier, the preposterous idea that he might have missed an apex predator.

The demograph servitor wasn’t interested. It handed the papers back to Drusher and stalked away.

In the meantime, the short-haired woman had taken the seat opposite him. She smiled at Drusher. Her face was lean and sturdy, with a tiny scar zagging up from the left-hand corner of her lip. Her eyes were dazzling amber, like photoluminescent cells.

Drusher looked away.

‘Magos biologis?’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘I couldn’t help overhearing.’

‘Apparently.’

The servitor had dismounted. With a lurch like sea-swell, the gref-carrier rose and got underway again.

‘I was told you were coming,’ she said.

‘What?’

The woman reached into her fur coat – highland fox, if he wasn’t mistaken – and produced a wallet, which she flipped open to reveal the golden badge inside.

‘Germaine Macks, province Arbites.’

‘You were expecting me, officer?’

‘A squirt from the governor’s office. An expert on his way. I’m thrilled, of course. It’s about time. So, what’s the plan?’

‘Plan?’

‘Your m.o.?’

Drusher shrugged. ‘I suppose I’ll examine habitat, look for spores, collate cases and get a decent pict or two if I can.’ His voice trailed off. In seven years, no official had ever taken such interest in his work.

‘And how do you plan to kill it?’ she asked.

‘Kill it?’ he echoed.

‘Yes,’ she said, chuckling, as if party to some joke. ‘That being the point.’

‘I don’t intend to kill it. I don’t take samples. Just descriptive records, for the taxonomy.’ He patted his sketchbooks.

‘But you have to kill it,’ she said, earnestly. ‘I mean, if you don’t, who the hell will?’

By the firelight of the great hearth, Baron Karne went on expansively for several minutes.

‘The Lord Governor is a personal friend, a childhood friend, and when he makes it known that a scholar such as yourself is coming to my part of the

world, I take pains to make that scholar welcome. Ask, and it will be given, magos. Any service, any requirement. I am happy to provide.'

'Th-thank you, baron,' Drusher said uneasily. He looked around the room. Trophy heads, crested with vast antlers and grimacing their fangs, haunted the shadowy walls. A winter storm battered at the leaded windows. Outer Udar was colder than he had dared imagine.

'I wonder if there might have been a mistake,' Drusher ventured.

'How is that?'

'Sir, I am a taxonomist. A scholar. My expertise is in the cataloguing of fauna-forms. The Lord Governor – your childhood friend, as you say – commissioned me to compile a concordance of Gershom's animal life. I've come here because... well, there seems to be a curiosity out here I may have missed. A predator. I'm here to identify it for the taxonomy. Not to kill it. I'm no hunter.'

'You're not?'

'Not at all, sir. I sketch and examine and catalogue.'

The baron bowed his head. 'Dear me... Really?'

'I'm truly sorry, sir.'

He looked over at the door into the dining room. It was ajar, and light slanted through the gap.

'What will I tell them?' the baron said.

Drusher felt desperately out of his depth. 'If you have guests – I mean, to save face – I could play along, I suppose.'

Around the long candlelit table were nineteen local lairds and their ladies, the rotund Bishop of Udar and his secretary, and a square-jawed man with sandy-white hair and piercing eyes. His name was Skoh. Drusher wasn't entirely sure who Skoh was. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure of anything any more. The baron introduced him as 'that expert from the city I've been promising'.

'You are a famous hunter, then?' the bishop asked Drusher.

'Not famous, your holiness. I have some expertise in the line of animals.'

'Good, good. So claims Skoh here, but in three months, what?'

'It is a difficult beast, your honour,' Skoh said softly. 'I'd welcome some expert advice. What weapon do you favour, magos? Hollowpoint or shot? Do you bait? Do you use blinds?'

'I... um... favour multiple means, sir. Whatever suits.'

'Aren't you terribly afraid?' asked one of the ladies.

‘One must never underestimate the quarry, lady,’ Drusher said, hoping it conveyed an appropriate sense of duty and caution.

‘They say it has no eyes. How does it find its prey?’ asked the bishop.

‘By scent,’ Drusher replied emphatically.

‘Not so,’ snapped Skoh. ‘My hunters have been using sealed body sleeves. Not one sniff of pheromone escapes those suits. And still it finds them.’

‘It is,’ said Drusher, ‘a difficult beast. When was it last seen?’

‘The thirteenth,’ said the baron, ‘Up in the ridgeway, having taken a parlour maid from the yard at Laird Connok’s manse. My men scoured the woods for it, to no avail. Before that, the swineherd killed at Karla. The waterman at Sont’s Crossroads. The two boys out late by Laer’s Mere.’

‘You forget,’ said one of the lairds, ‘my potman, just before the killings at the Mere.’

The baron nodded. ‘My apologies.’

‘The beast is a blight on our land,’ said the bishop. ‘I say to you all, a speck of Chaos. We must rally round the holy aquila and renounce the darkness. This thing has come to test our faith.’

Assenting murmurs grumbled around the table.

‘Are you a religious man, magos?’ the bishop asked.

‘Most certainly, your holiness.’

‘You must come to worship at my temple tomorrow. I would like to bless you before you begin your bloody work.’

‘Thank you, your holiness,’ Drusher said.

The outer door burst open, scudding all the candle flames, and a servant hurried in to whisper in the baron’s ear. Baron Karne nodded, and the servant hurried out again. A moment later, Arbites Officer Macks was standing in the doorway, dripping wet, a riotgun over one arm. Her badge was now pinned to the lapel of her leather bodysuit.

She looked around the room, pausing as she met Drusher’s eyes.

‘Deputy,’ said the baron, rising from his seat. ‘To what do we owe this interruption?’

‘Another death, lord,’ she said. ‘Out by the coops.’

The acreage to the north of Baron Karne’s draughty keep was a low swathe of marshy ground given over to poultry farming. Through the sleeting rain, thanks to the light of the bobbing lamps, Drusher could make out row upon

row of coop-sheds constructed from maritime ply and wire. There was a strong smell of mud and bird lime.

Drusher followed the baron and Officer Macks down boarded paths fringed by gorse hedges. With them came three of the baron's huscarls, lanterns swinging from the tines of their billhooks. The weather was dreadful. Icy rain stung Drusher's cheeks numb, and, as he pulled his old weathercoat tighter around him, he longed for a hat and a warm fox-fur jacket like the one Macks wore.

There was an odd wobbling noise just audible over the drumming of the rain. Drusher realised it was the agitated clucking of thousands of poultry birds.

They reached the coops, and trudged up a metal-mesh walkway between the first two shed rows. The bird-dung stink was stronger now, musty and stale despite the rain. Teased clumps of white feathers clogged the cage wire. Macks said something to the baron, and pointed. A flashlight beam moved around up ahead. It was one of Macks' junior Arbites, a young man by the name of Lussin, according to his quilted jacket's nametag. He looked agitated, and extremely glad to see company at last.

The frame door to one of the coop sheds was open; Macks shone her light inside. Drusher caught a glimpse of feathers and some kind of metal cylinder lying on the floor.

He followed Macks and the baron into the coop.

Drusher had never seen a dead body before, except for that of his Uncle Rudiger, who had died when Drusher was a boy. The family had visited his body in the chapel of rest to pay their respects, and Uncle Rudiger had looked normal. Asleep. Drusher, with a child's naiveté, had quite expected his uncle to jump up and laugh in their faces. Uncle Rudiger had been a great one for practical jokes.

The body in the poultry coop wasn't about to jump up or do anything. It was face down, thankfully, its limbs draped in a contorted, awkward way that wasn't a practical joke.

This was one of the baron's farm staff, apparently, a yeoman called Kalken. He'd been doing the night feed, and the metal cylinder Drusher had seen was Kalken's grain-hopper, lying where he'd dropped it in a pile of spilt maize.

Macks knelt by the body. She looked up at Drusher, and made a little jerk with her head that indicated he might want to go outside again. Drusher

stuck his hands in his coat pockets resolutely and stayed put. With a shrug, Macks turned the body over.

‘Are you all right?’ Macks said.

‘What?’

‘Are you all right?’

Drusher opened his eyes. He couldn’t remember leaving the coop, but he was outside in the rain again, leaning against the barn opposite, his hands clenched in the wire mesh so tight he’d drawn blood.

‘Magos?’

‘Y-yes,’ he stammered. ‘I’m fine.’ He thought it likely that he’d never forget what he’d just seen. The awful flop of the rolling body. The way a good deal of it had remained behind on the muddy floor.

‘Take a few deep breaths,’ she said.

‘I really am fine.’

‘You look pale.’

‘I’m always pale.’

She shrugged.

‘You might as well stay here,’ she added, though Drusher felt she’d said it less out of concern for his nerves and more because she knew he wasn’t particularly useful. ‘I’m going to make some notes in situ.’

‘There were bites,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Macks replied. ‘At least, I think so.’

‘Measure them. And examine the bite radius for foreign matter. Tooth fragments that might have lodged in the bone. That sort of thing.’

‘Right,’ she said and turned away.

‘Where did it get in?’ he called after her.

‘What?’

‘Where did it get in? Was the cage door open?’

‘No. He’d fastened it behind him when we found him.’

‘Can I borrow a flashlight?’

Macks got a lamp-pack from Lussin and gave it to Drusher. Then she went back into the coop with the baron to begin her grisly inspection properly.

Drusher began to walk away down the length of the coop run, shining his torch in through the cages on either side.

‘Don’t roam too far, sir!’ one of the huscarls called after him.

Drusher didn't answer. He wanted to roam as far as he could. The thought of being anywhere near that bloody, dismembered mess made him shiver. He was sweating despite the winter gale.

Ten metres down, near the end of the row, he found the wire cage roof of one of the coops had been torn wide open. Drusher played the torch around. He was near the end fence of the poultry compound, a three-metre timber pale topped with a barbed and electrified string of wires. He could see no hole in the fence or damage to the deterrent wires. Had the beast cleared the wall itself? Quite a leap. There was no sign of spore in the thick mud at his feet. The rain was washing it into soup.

He let himself into the ruptured stoop and examined the torn wire roof. With the rain splashing off his face, he reached up and yanked part of it down, studying the broken ends with his lamp closely.

It wasn't torn. It was cut, cleanly, the tough wire strands simply severed. What could do that? Certainly not teeth, not even teeth that could take the front off a man's face and body. A power blade, perhaps, but that would leave signs of oxidation and heat-fatigue.

As far as he knew – and there was no man on Gershom better qualified – there wasn't an animal on the planet that could leap a three-metre security fence and slice open reinforced agricultural mesh.

Drusher took out the compact digital picter he always carried, and took a few snaps of the wire for reference. It came through this cage roof, he thought. Probably landed on it, in point of fact, coming over the fence, cut its way in... and then what?

He looked around. The covered timber coop-end of the shed was dark and unforthcoming.

It suddenly occurred to him that whatever it was might still be there.

He felt terror and stupidity in roughly equal measures. He'd been so anxious to get away from that terrible corpse and prove he was good for something, the blindingly obvious had passed him by.

It was still here. It was still right here in the shadows of the coop-box. Once the idea had entered his brain it became unshakeable fact. It really was there, just out of sight in the gloom, breathing low, gazing at him without eyes, coiling to pounce.

He backed towards the cage door, fumbling for the latch. He could hear it moving now, the rustle of straw, the crunch of dried lime on the box's wooden floor.

Dear God-Emperor, he was going to—

‘Drusher? Golden Throne! I nearly blasted you!’ Macks emerged from the coop-box, straw sticking to her wet hair. She lowered her riotgun.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked

‘I was... looking for... traces...’ he said, trying to slow his thrashing pulse. He gestured up at the torn cage roof.

‘You’ll love this then,’ she said, and led him into the stinking darkness of the coop-box. The floor was littered with dead poultry, feathers glued to the wallboards with blood. The smell of offal was overpowering, and made him gag.

Macks shone her flashlight at the end wall, and showed him the splintered hole in the timbers.

‘It came in and went right down through the row of coops, smashing through each dividing wall until it found Kalken,’ she said. She’d come back along that route to find Drusher. The holes were easily big enough for her to get through.

‘Killed everything in its path,’ she said. ‘Hundreds of roosting birds.’

‘But it didn’t eat anything,’ he observed, struggling to overcome his nausea. ‘It slashed or bit its way through, but there’s no sign of feeding.’

‘That’s important why?’ she asked.

He shrugged. He took shots of the splintered holes with his picter, and then got her to hold the light steady while he measured the dimensions of each hole with his las-surveyor.

‘Have you told anyone?’ he asked her.

‘Told anyone what?’

‘The truth about me? About what I am?’

She shook her head. ‘I didn’t see any point.’

‘The baron knows,’ he told her.

‘Right.’

There was movement outside, and he followed her out of the stoop. Skoh was coming down the walkway through the rain. He’d changed into a foul-weather suit, and was hefting what looked like an autolaser, though Drusher was no expert on weapons. It had a big, chrome drum-barrel, and was so heavy it was supported by a gyro harness strapped around his torso. An auspex target-lens covered his right eye like a patch.

‘You’ve seen the body?’ she asked him.

‘Yes. My men are sweeping the wood behind the fence.’

‘It came right through here,’ she said, indicating the run of coops.

Skoh nodded and looked at Drusher, as if expecting some expert insight from him. When none came, Skoh left them without a word, and continued on down the path.

‘Who is he?’ Drusher asked.

‘Fernal Skoh? He’s a freelance hunter. Game specialist. The community hired him and his men when it became clear I wasn’t up to the job.’ There was rich contempt in her voice.

‘The bishop doesn’t think much of him,’ Drusher said.

Macks grinned. ‘The bishop doesn’t think much of anyone. Skoh hasn’t had much success so far, despite his flashy rep. Besides, the bishop has his own man on the job.’

‘His own man?’

‘Gundax. You’ll meet him before long. He’s the bishop’s bodyguard. Tough piece of work.’

‘Doesn’t the bishop think Skoh can get the job done?’

‘I don’t think anybody does any more. The baron’s threatening to withhold Skoh’s fee. Anyway, Skoh’s not the bishop’s sort.’

‘What?’

‘Skoh’s ungodly, according to his holiness. His background is in bloodsports. The Imperial Pits on Thustathrax.’

Drusher’s repose was fractured by lurid dreams of bodies that left steaming parts behind when they rolled over. In the small hours, he gave up on rest, and got out of bed.

He’d been given a room on an upper floor of the keep. It was terribly cold, and the wind and rain rattled the poorly fitted shutters. Drusher got dressed, activated a glow-globe, and stoked some life into the portable heater. He spread out his equipment and notebooks on the table, by the light of the globe, and distracted himself with study.

There wasn’t a land predator in Gershom that even approximately fit the evidence. Prairie wolves from the western continent, *Lupus cygnadae gershomi*, were rapacious enough, but their pack mentality meant they were unlikely to be lone killers. The great mottled felid of the peninsula taiga, sadly almost extinct, had the bulk and power, and could have cleared the fence, but neither it nor a prairie wolf could have cut wire like that. And either would have fed.

Besides, Macks had given him her scribbled findings. There was no foreign matter in the poor yeoman's wounds, but she'd made an estimation of the bite radius. Fifty-three centimetres. Fifty-three!

No wolf came close. The biggest radius Drusher had measured for a felid was thirty-seven, and that had been from a skull in the Peninsula Museum. All the biggest cats were long dead now.

The only thing that came close was *Gnathocorda maximus*, the vast, deep ocean fish. But this was Outer Udar. There were no wolves here, no forest cats, and certainly no sharks on the loose.

He looked at the picts he'd made of the holes in the coop walls. It was hard to define from the splinter damage, but it looked like each gap had been ripped open by a double blow, each point descending diagonally from the upper corners. Like a man slicing an X with two swords.

And what was all this talk about it having no eyes?

Lyam Gundax's eyes were dark and set close together. He was a tall, massively muscled man with a forked beard and braided black hair. Drusher could smell his body-sweat, a scent like that of an animal.

'Who are you and what do you want?'

It was early in the day. The rains had slowed to a drizzle, and the land was dark under a grey sky. Outer Udar was a wide skirt of rocky uplands and black forests around the dismal horizon.

Drusher had come to the cathedral only to find his way into the nave blocked by the big, fur-clad Gundax. The bishop's man was decorated with bead necklaces and wriststraps, heavy with polished stones, charms, Imperial symbols and animal teeth.

'Gundax! Come away!' the bishop called out, as if calling off a dog. He wobbled into view as Gundax stepped back.

'Drusher, my dear child,' the bishop greeted him. 'Pay no attention to my rogue here. This is the magos biologi I told you about,' he told Gundax.

Gundax nodded curtly, his leather smock creaking. His charm beads clattered against each other.

'Walk with me,' the bishop told Drusher.

They plodded side by side down the nave. Drusher made a few admiring remarks about the temple's towering architecture and glorious stained glass work.

'This is a hard parish,' said the bishop. 'Hard and hardy on the edge of beyond. Of course, I'm not complaining. I serve the God-Emperor in

whatever capacity He calls on me to perform. And here is as good as anywhere.'

'The Emperor protects,' Drusher said.

'He doesn't seem to be doing that so much here these days,' said the bishop. 'It weakens the faith. I have a tough enough time instilling virtue and belief into the weather-beaten folk of this blasted land, and this beast... It saps every ounce of fibre.'

'It must be difficult, your holiness.'

'Life is difficult. We rise to our tests. But, my dear magos, I fear for the spiritual life of this community almost as much as I fear for its flesh and blood. This thing... this beast... it is not an animal. It is a test of faith. An emissary of Chaos. For it to roam here, unchecked also shows that disbelief may roam here likewise. In every sermon I preach, I declaim as much. The beast is a sign that we have fallen away and allowed taint into our souls. To kill it, to cast it out, we must first reaffirm our faith in the Golden Throne.'

'You make it sound simple, your holiness.'

'It is not, of course! But this beast may be a blessing in disguise. Ultimately, I mean. If it makes us renew our belief and our trust in the absolute sanctity of the aquila, then I will offer thanks for it in time. Only in true adversity may a congregation find its focus.'

'I commend your zeal, bishop.'

'So... do you have any leads? Any expert insight?'

'Not yet, your holiness.'

'Ah well, early days. Come, let me bless you and your work.'

'Your holiness? One thing?'

'Yes, magos?' said the bishop brightly, halting in his tracks.

'You said the beast has no eyes. In fact, that seems to be the popular conviction.' Drusher paused, remembering the words of the child on the coach.

'No eyes, indeed! No eyes, that's what they say.'

'Who, your holiness?'

The bishop paused. 'Why, the folk of Outer Udar. It is what they know of it.'

'I was of the understanding that no one had actually seen this thing. Seen it and survived, I mean.'

The bishop shrugged. 'Really?'

‘I know of no eye-witness. No one can offer any sort of description. No one knows the form or size of this thing. Of course, we can make guesses. We know it has teeth from the wounds it delivers, and from that I can estimate the size of the mouth. We know it is small enough to pass through a man-sized hole. And, I fancy, it has shearing claws or talons of some considerable size. But other than that, there is no certainty of its form or nature. And yet... everyone seems certain it has no eyes. Why is that, do you think?’

‘Tattle,’ smiled the bishop. ‘Tavern talk, fireside yap. You know how people invent things, especially if they know nothing and they’re afraid. I’m sure it has eyes.’

‘I see,’ said Drusher.

‘Now, come and receive my blessing.’

Drusher endured the short blessing ritual. He didn’t feel any better for it.

‘I would appreciate your collaboration, magos,’ said Fernal Skoh. Drusher raised his eyebrows and hesitated, then let the hunter into his chambers. It was late afternoon, and an ice-wind was rising in the north.

Skoh, dressed in a leather body-glove reinforced with mail links and segments of plasteel armour plate, entered Drusher’s quarters in the keep and looked around.

Drusher closed the door after him.

‘A drink?’ he offered.

‘Thank you, yes.’

Drusher poured two glasses of amasec from the flask in his luggage. Skoh was wandering the room. He paused at the table, and looked down at Drusher’s spread-out mass of notebooks, data-slates and jottings. Skoh carefully leafed through one of the sketch books, studying each water colour illustration.

Drusher brought him his drink.

‘This is fine work,’ said Skoh, making an admiring gesture towards the sketches. ‘Truly you have a good hand and a great eye. That grazer there. Just so.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re no hunter though, are you, Drusher?’

The question took Drusher aback.

‘No,’ he admitted.

‘That’s fine,’ said Skoh, sipping his drink. ‘I didn’t think so. You’re just one more fool caught up in this mess.’

‘I hear you worked the Imperial Pits.’

Skoh looked at Drusher cautiously. ‘Who’s been talking?’

‘Deputy Macks.’

Skoh nodded. ‘Well, it’s true. Twenty-five years I worked for the arena on Thustathrax as a procurer.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I was paid to travel the wilder worlds of the Imperium trapping and collecting animal specimens to fight in the arena. The odder, the more savage, the better. It brought the crowds in if we had something... unusual.’

‘Something like this beast?’

Skoh didn’t reply.

‘It must have been interesting work. Dangerous work. That’s why the bishop doesn’t like you, isn’t it?’

Skoh managed a small smile. ‘The arenas of the Imperial Pits are ungodly, according to his holiness. I was employed by a secular entertainment industry that revelled in bloodletting and carnage. I am, to him, the lowest of the low. And an outsider to boot.’

‘What did you want, Skoh?’ Drusher asked.

‘The baron tells me my fee will be forfeit if I fail to make a kill soon. I have wages to pay, overheads to consider. This job has dragged on. I can kill this beast, Drusher, but I can’t find it. I think you can. Help me, and I’ll pay you a dividend of my earnings.’

‘I’m not interested in money,’ said Drusher, sipping his amasec.

‘You’re not?’

‘I’m interested in two things. An end to this slaughter and a personal closure. I was hired to produce a complete taxonomy of this planet’s fauna. Now, at the eleventh hour, I seem to have a new apex predator on my hands. If that’s so, it will throw my entire work into disarray. Seven years’ work, you understand?’

‘You think this is an apex predator that you’ve missed?’

‘No,’ said Drusher. ‘Not even slightly. There’d be records, previous incidents. This is either a known predator gone rogue and acting abnormally or...’

‘Or?’

‘It’s an exotic.’

Skoh nodded. 'You've been here a day and you're that certain?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you have supporting evidence?'

'It doesn't match anything I've turned up in seven years. And it doesn't feed. There is no sign of appetite or predation. It simply kills and kills and kills again. That's the behaviour of a rogue animal, a carnivore that's no longer killing due to hunger. And it's the behaviour of a creature alien to this world. May I ask you a couple of questions?'

Skoh set his empty glass down on the table. 'By all means.'

'Why do they say it has no eyes? Where did that rumour come from?'

'All I know about that is that the lack of eyes is a regular feature of the bishop's hellfire sermons. I presumed it was hyperbolic invention on his part, which has fallen into common rumour.'

'My other question is this – you know what it is, don't you?'

Skoh looked at him. His eyes pierced right through Drusher.

'No,' he said.

By dawn the next day, there had been another death. A swine herder out beyond the crossroads had been killed in the night, and twenty of his saddlebacks along with him. Drusher went out into the sparse woodland with Skoh, Macks, Lussin and two of Skoh's huntsmen.

The air was cold and ice-fog wrapped the hillside. It was ten below. At the swine farm, the bodies of hogs and hogherd alike had frozen into the mud of the pens, their copious blood making ruby-like crystals.

In the steep thorn scrub above the swine farm, Drusher stopped the group and handed out the cartridges he'd prepared the night before.

'Load them into your shotguns,' he said. 'They won't have much range, I'm afraid.'

Macks and Lussin had Arbites-issue riotguns. Skoh had made sure his men had brought short action pump-shots along with their heavy ordnance. Both huntsmen, like Skoh, were weighed down with torso rigs supporting massive autolasers.

'What are these?' Lussin asked.

Drusher broke a cartridge open to show them. Little chrome pellets were packed inside in a sticky fluid suspension.

'Trackers,' he said. 'Miniature tracker units. They have a two thousand-kilometre range. I usually use them for ringing birds. In fact I plotted the

migration patterns of the lesser beakspot and the frigate gull *Tachybaptus maritimus* over a three-year period using just these very—'

'I'm sure you did a great job,' snapped Macks. 'But can we get on?'

Drusher nodded. 'I've packed them in contact adhesive. If you see anything – anything – then you mark it.'

They made their way up the thorny scarp, and entered a stretch of black-birch woodland. Thanks to the fog, the world had become a shrunken, myopic place. Unaided visibility was twenty metres. Stark and twisted black trees hemmed them in, gradually receding into the white vapour. The earth was hard, and groundcover leaves were brittle with frost. The obscured sun backlit the fog, turning the sky into a glowing white haze. Skoh spread the group into a wide line, but still close enough for every person to be visible at least to his immediate neighbour. Drusher stayed with Macks. There was an uncanny stillness, broken only by the sounds of their breathing and movement.

Drusher was bone-cold. Macks, wearing a quilted Arbites jacket, had lent him her fox-fur jacket, which he wore over his own weathercoat. His breath clouded the air.

'Do you have a weapon?' she asked.

He shook his head.

She slid a short-pattern autopistol out of an underarm rig, checked the load, and handed it to him grip first.

He looked at it uncertainly, as if it were some new specimen for collation. It had a brushed-matt finish and a black, rubberised grip.

'The safety's here, beside the trigger guard. If you have to fire it, hold it with both hands, and aim low because the kick lifts it.'

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I've never been a great one for guns.'

'I'd feel better if you had something.'

'You wouldn't feel better if I shot you by accident, which is likely if you let me loose with something like that.'

She shrugged and put it away again.

'Your funeral,' she said.

'I do hope not.'

They walked on another kilometre or two. Skoh and his hired hands had auspex units taped to their forearms, scanning for movement.

'What was the time of death, do you reckon?' Drusher asked.

Macks pursed her lips. 'Four, four-thirty? The bodies had a residual core temperature.'

'So three or four hours ago?'

The chance of anything still being around seemed very slim to Drusher. Given the Beast's hit-and-run habits, it would be long gone by now. But the cold offered possibilities. It had set the soil hard and solid. Tracks might remain. Drusher kept his eyes on the ground.

They went across open fields, thick with rime, and along the basin of a wooded dell where the fallen leaves had frozen into a slippery mat. The fog was actually beginning to disperse, but down in the hollow it was as thick as smoke. Butcher birds, jet-black and armed with shiny hook-beaks, cawed, clacked and circled in the treetops.

Drusher suddenly heard an extraordinary noise. It sounded like an industrial riveter or a steam-powered loom. A puffing, pneumatic sputter interlaced with high-pitch squeals.

Macks started to run. Her vox-link crackled into life.

'What is it?' Drusher called, hurrying after her.

He heard the noise again, and made more sense of it. One of Skoh's men had opened fire with his autolaser.

He scrambled through the frosty ground-brush, trying to keep up with Macks' jogging as she slipped in and out of sight between the tree trunks. Twice, he went over on the frozen rug of leaves, scraping his palms.

'Macks! What's going on?'

More shooting. A second weapon joining the first. *Stacatto puff-zwip-puff-zwip*.

Then the dreadful, plangent boom of a shotgun.

Drusher almost ran into Macks. She had stopped in her tracks.

Ahead of them, in a narrow clearing between leafless tindletrees, Skoh lay on his back. It looked like his chest and groin was on fire, but Drusher realised it wasn't smoke. It was steam, wafting up from wretched wounds that had all but eviscerated him. His heavy weapon and part of its gimbal-rig had been torn off and were lying on the other side of the clearing. Huge clouts of fused earth had been torn out of the ground and two small trees severed completely from the fury of his shooting.

'Throne of Terra...' Macks stammered.

Drusher felt oddly dislocated, as if it wasn't actually happening. They walked together, slowly, towards the body of the hunter. He still had his

pump-shot clamped in his hand. The end of the barrel was missing.

Macks suddenly swung left, her riotgun aimed. One of Skoh's men stood on the other side of the clearing, half-hidden by a tree and only now visible to them. He wasn't actually standing. His body was lodged upright by the tree itself. His head was bowed onto his chest, the angle of the tilt far, far greater than any spine should allow. Macks approached him tentatively, and reached out a hand. When she touched him, he sagged sideways and his head flopped further. Drusher saw that only the merest shred of skin kept it attached to the rest of the body.

Drusher was overcome with heaving retches, and he wobbled over to the thickets to throw up. Lussin and the other huntsman stumbled into the clearing while he was emptying his stomach.

'Did you see anything?' Macks barked at the other men.

'I just heard the shooting,' Lussin moaned. He couldn't take his eyes from Skoh's awfully exposed entrails.

'That's it, then,' said the hunter. He leaned back against a tree trunk, and clutched his head in his hands. 'Damn, that's it then.'

'It's got to be close! Come on!' Macks snapped.

'And do what?' the hunter asked. 'Two of them, with auto-lasers, and they didn't kill it.' He nodded to Skoh's body. 'That's my paycheque gone. All my dividends.'

'Is that all you care about?' Lussin asked.

'No,' said the hunter, 'I care about living too.' He took out a lho-stick, lit it, and sucked hard. 'I told Skoh we'd wasted our time here. Stayed too long. He wouldn't admit it. He said he couldn't afford to cut our losses and leave. Screw it. Screw him.'

The hunter straightened up and dragged on his lho-stick again.

'Good luck,' he said and began to walk away.

'Where the hell are you going?' Macks demanded.

'Where we should have gone weeks ago. As far away as possible.'

'Come back!' cried Lussin.

The hunter shook his head, and wandered away into the fog. Drusher never saw him again.

'What do we do?' Lussin asked Macks. She was prowling up and down, fists clenched. She growled something.

'One of them got a round off, with a shotgun,' Drusher said. His voice was hoarse from vomiting, and his mouth tasted foul.

‘You sure?’ Macks snapped.

‘I heard a shotgun,’ Drusher said.

‘I didn’t,’ said Macks.

‘I think I did... maybe...’ Lussin murmured softly, rubbing his eyes.

‘Get an auspex!’ Macks ordered. Drusher wasn’t sure who she was speaking to, but Lussin didn’t move. Reluctantly, Drusher approached Skoh’s body, trying not to look directly at it. He crouched down and started to peel away the tape that secured the compact scanner to Skoh’s left gauntlet.

Skoh opened his eyes and exhaled steam. Drusher screamed, and would have leapt back if the hunter’s left hand hadn’t grabbed his wrist.

‘Drusher...’

‘Oh no... oh no...’

The hand pulled him closer. He could smell the hot, metallic stink of blood.

‘Saw it...’

‘What?’

‘I... saw... it...’ Thin, watery blood leaked from Skoh’s mouth, and his breathing was ragged. His eyes were dull and filmy.

‘What did you see?’ asked Drusher.

‘You... were... right, Drusher... I... I did... know what... it was... suspected... didn’t want... didn’t want to say... cause a panic... and anyway... couldn’t be true... not here... couldn’t be here...’

‘What did you see?’ Drusher repeated.

‘All the things... I’ve tracked... tracked and caught in... in my life... for the Pits... you know I worked for the Pits...?’

‘Yes.’

‘Never seen one... before... but been told... about them... you don’t mess with... don’t mess with them... don’t care what the... the Pits would pay for one.’

‘What was it, Skoh?’

‘The Great... Great Devourer...’

‘Skoh?’

The hunter tried to turn his head to look at Drusher. A torrent of black blood gushed from his mouth and nostrils, and his eyes went blank.

Drusher tore the auspex from the dead man’s forearm, and got to his feet.

‘What did he say?’ Macks asked.

‘He was raving,’ said Drusher. ‘The pain had taken his senses away.’

He swept the auspex around, and tried to adjust its depth of field. He was getting a lot of nearby bounce from the trackers that had gone wide, and pelted the ferns and tree boles.

Two contacts showed at a greater range. Two of the glue-dipped teleplugs anchored to the hide of something moving north-west, just a kilometre and a half away.

‘Got anything?’

‘Yes. Come on.’

Macks was clearly considering taking one of the heavy auto-las weapons from the corpses, but that would mean touching them.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Lead on.’

‘Macks?’

‘Yes?’

‘Maybe I should borrow that handgun after all,’ Drusher said.

They hurried through the frozen woodland, following the steady returns of the auspex. The fog was burning off, and the heavy red sun was glowering down, casting a rosy tint across the iced wilderness.

When they paused for a moment to catch their breaths, Macks looked at the magos.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘I was just thinking...’

‘Thinking what?’

‘Skoh was looking for this thing for months. State of the art track-ware, qualified help. Not a sign. And then, today...’

‘He got unlucky. Damn, we all got unlucky.’

‘No,’ said Drusher. ‘If you were the beast... wouldn’t today be a good day to turn and take him out? It was his last serious try. He’s coming out with a magos biologist at his side, changing tactics. Using taggers.’

‘What are you saying, Drusher?’

Drusher shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It’s... convenient, I suppose. This thing is quick and sly enough to do its evil work and stay right out of harm’s way. By the time a killing is discovered, it’s long gone. Today, we had the best chance yet of catching it. And what does it do? It changes its habits entirely and turns on us.’

‘So?’ asked Lussin.

‘Almost like it knew. Almost like it was concerned that a magos biologists and an experienced tracker might have enough skill between them to pose a realistic threat.’

‘It’s just an animal. What did you call it? An apex predator.’

‘Maybe. But it’s what a man would do. A fugitive who’s evaded capture this long, but hears that the search for him has stepped up. He might decide the time was right to turn and fight.’

‘You talk like you know what this thing is, Drusher,’ said Macks.

‘I don’t. It doesn’t fit into any taxonomy I’ve studied. It doesn’t fit into any Imperial taxonomy either. Except maybe classified ones.’

‘What?’

‘Come on.’

Drusher stood up and hurried on through the copse.

The air-mill had been derelict for fifty years. Its weather boards had fallen away and the sails of its wind-rotor were flaking. The district had processed its flour here, before the cheaper mass-production plant had opened in Udar Town half a century ago.

Drusher, Macks and Lussin edged through the chokes of weed brush towards the rear of the ruin. The tracker tags had been stationary for half an hour.

Macks pushed the lap-frame door open with the snout of her riotgun. They slid inside. The interior space was a dingy cone of timber and beamed floors. The mill-gear ran down through the tower’s spine like the gears of a gigantic clock.

It smelled of mildew and rotting flour-dust. Drusher took out the pistol. He pointed upwards. Lussin, riotgun gripped tightly, edged up the open-framed steps to the second level.

Drusher heard something. A slither. A scurry.

He hung back against the wall. There was something up with the auspex. An interference pattern that was making the screen jump. As if an outside signal was chopping the scanner’s returns.

Macks circled wide, gun raised to aim at the roof. Lussin reached the head of the stairs and switched around, sweeping with his gun. Drusher tried to get the auspex to clear.

Lussin screamed, and his gun went off. There was a heavy, splintering sound as he fell backwards down the steps, his weapon discharging a second time.

He was dead. The front of his skull was peeled off, and blood squirted into the air.

Macks howled, and fired her riotgun into the ceiling, pumping the grip and blasting the rotten floorboards in a blizzard of wood splinters with each successive shot. Every muzzle-flash lit the mill room for a millisecond

Exploding wood away before it, the Beast smashed through the deck and came down at them.

It was a blur. Just a blur, moving faster than anything had a right to. Macks' riotgun boomed again. The creature moved like smoke in a draught. Drusher had a fleeting glimpse of deep purple body plates, a snapping tail of gristly bone, forearm claws like harvest scythes. Macks screamed.

Drusher dropped the auspex, and fired his pistol.

The recoil almost broke his wrist. He yelped in pain and frustration, stung hard by the kick. Use both hands, she'd told him.

It turned from Macks, chittering, and bounded across the floor right at him.

It was beautiful. Perfect. An organic engine designed for one sole task: murder. The muscular power of the body, the counterweight tail; the scythe limbs, like a pair of swords. The inhuman hatred.

It had no eyes, at least none that he could see.

Hold the gun with both hands and aim low. That's what she'd said. Because of the kick.

Drusher fired. The recoil slammed up his arms. If he'd hit anything, it wasn't obvious. He fired again.

The Beast opened its mouth. Fifty-three centimetres of bite radius, teeth like thorns. The blade-limbs jerking back to kill him.

He fired again. And again. He saw at least one round flick away, deflected by the Beast's bio-armour.

It was right on him.

And then it was thrown sideways against the wall.

It dropped, writhed, and rose again.

Drusher shot it in the head.

It lunged at him. A riotgun roared and blew it back. Bleeding from the forehead, Macks stepped up and fired blast after blast. She fired until the gun was empty, then took the pistol out of Drusher's hands and emptied that into it too.

Ichor covered the walls. Frothy goo dribbled out of the Beast's fractured bone armour.

'What is it?' Macks asked.

'I believe,' Drusher replied, 'it's called a hormagaunt.'

But Macks had passed out.

It took the better part of an hour for the relief team of Arbites to reach them from Udar Town. Drusher had made Macks comfortable by then, and dressed her wounds.

Pistol in hand, he'd carefully examined the beast. The goad-control was easy to find, implanted in the back of the eyeless head.

When Macks came round again, he showed her.

'You need to deal with this.'

'What does it mean?'

'It means this abomination was brought here deliberately. It means that someone was controlling it, directing it in a rudimentary fashion.'

'Really? Like who?'

'I'd start by asking the bishop some questions, and his pet heavy, Gundax. I could be wrong, of course, because it's not my field, but I think the bishop has a lot to gain from something that puts the fear of the God-Emperor into his flock. It steels the faith of a congregation to have something real to rally against.'

'He did this on purpose?'

'It's just a theory. Someone did.'

Macks was quiet for a while. He could guess what she was thinking. There would be an investigation and an inquest. The Inquisition may have to be involved. Every aspect of life in the province would be scrutinised and pulled apart. It could take months. Drusher knew it meant he wouldn't be leaving Outer Udar any time soon. As a chief witness, he'd be required to stay.

Outside, it had begun to sleet again.

'You must be happy at least,' murmured Macks. 'That work of yours, your great taxonomy. It's all done. You've finished.'

'It was done before I even got here,' said Drusher dryly. He nodded at the body of the beast. He'd covered it with a piece of sacking so he didn't have to look at it any more. 'That wasn't part of my job. Just a curiosity.'

'Oh well,' she replied with a sigh.

He went to the mill door, and gazed out into the sleeting wilds. Ice pricked at his face. Gershom would be keeping him in its chilly grip a while longer yet.

‘Could I keep this jacket a little longer?’ he asked Macks, indicating the fur coat she’d lent him. ‘It’s going to be a cold winter.’

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PLAYING PATIENCE

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I

West of Urbitane, the slum-tracts begin, and one descends into a ragged wilderness of dispiriting ruins where the only signs of life are the armoured manses of the narcobarons, projecting like metal blisters above the endless rubble. This is a destitute realm, a great and shameful urban waste, stalked by the Pennyraiders and the Dolors and a myriad other gangs, where Imperial authority has only the most tenuous grip.

A foetid wind blows through the slum-tracts, exhaled like bad breath from the sumps and stacks of the massive city. This miasmal air whines through the rotting habitats and moans in the shadows.

And those shadows are permanent, for the flanks of Urbitane rise behind the tracts, eclipsing all daylight. Flecked with a billion lamps, the rockcrete stacks of the sweating hive city ascend into the roiling clouds like the angular shoulders of some behemoth emerging from chthonic depths, and soar as a sheer cliff above the slums that litter the lightless ground at its foot.

Sub-orbitals cross the murky sky, their trace-lights blinking like cursors on a dark screen. Occasionally, the slums tremble as a bulk-lifter passes particularly low overhead on its final approach into the canyons of the hive, the bass rumble of its engines shivering the air.

Where, in the west, the hive stacks come tumbling down to meet the slums, shelving like giant staircases in bad repair, there is a patched stonework tower that houses the Kindred Youth Scholam. It is a meagre place, supported by charitable works, teetering on the brink between city and slum. Humble, crumbling, it faces west, its many window-slits barred, for the safety of the pupils.

At the start of the year 396 Imperial, there were, among the scholam's many inhabitants, three sisters called Prudence, Providence and Patience.

The night I arrived on Sameter, the rigorists had locked Patience in the scholam's oubliette.

II

Sameter is a dismal place, and its morose air matched our mood. A slovenly, declining agrochemical world in the heartlands of the Helican subsector, it had seen better days.

So had we. My companions and I were weary and dejected. Pain clung to us like a shroud, so tightly none of us could express our grief. It had been that way for six months, since Majeskus. The only thing that kept us together and moved us along was a basic desire for revenge.

We had been forced to make the voyage to Sameter aboard a privately hired transport. The *Hinterlight* was dry-docked for repairs half a subsector away, and its mistress, Cynia Preest, had pledged to rejoin us as soon as the work was done. But I knew she was rueing the day she had ever agreed to assist my mission. When I had last spoken with her, she had confided, bitterly, that another incident like Majeskus would surely make her break her compact with me and return to the life of a merchant rogue in the Grand Banks.

She blamed me. They all blamed me, and they were damn well right. I had underestimated Molotch. I had given him the opening. My blind confidence had led to the disaster. Throne, what a fool I had been! Molotch was the sort of enemy one should never underestimate. He was Cognitae, perhaps the brightest and best to emerge from that infernal institution, which took genius as a basic prerequisite.

Our lander skimmed down through the filthy air above the Urbitane isthmus, bumping in the crosswind chop, and cycled in towards one of the hive's private landing gantries on the north side of the city. As the breaking jets fired, sudden, intense gravity hung upon us. Even inside my suspensor field, I felt its weight. I had linked one of my chair's data cables to the lander's systems, and so saw everything that the shuttered cabin denied my friends. The looming piles of the hive, the shelf-like stacks, each one kilometres wide, the bristling lights, the smog. Hive towers rose up, as vast and impassive as tombstones, etched with lit windows. Chimneys exhaled skeins of black smoke. The lower airways buzzed with small fliers and

ornithopters, like gnats swarming up on a summer evening. There, the spires of the Ecclesiarch Basilica, gilded like a crown; beyond, the huge glass roofs of the Northern Commercialia, so high that the clouds of a microclimate weather system had formed beneath their vault. There, the Inner Consul, the radiating rings of the transit system, the wrought-iron pavilions of the Agriculture Guild.

We touched down at sunset. Great, shimmering doughnuts of gas-flame were issuing from the promethium refineries along the isthmus, bellying up like small, fireball suns against the curdled brown undercast. The private landing gantry was high up in the twisted mass of the inner hive-towers. Leased by the local ordos to provide convenient access to the city, it was a creaking metal platform trembled by the wind shear. Even so, exhaust vapour from our dented, scabby lander pooled in an acrid haze inside the rusting safety basket of the pad. The lander, a gross-utility vehicle three hundred years old, reclined on its pneumatic landing claws like a tailless lizard. It had been painted red, a long time ago, but the colour was only a memory now. Steam hissed from the rapidly cooling hydraulics, and a disturbing quantity of lubricant and system fluid gushed out of its underside from joints and cracks and fissures.

Without asking, Kara Swole took hold of my chair's handle, and pushed me out down the open ramp. I could have done it myself, but I sensed that Kara, like all of them, wanted something to do, just to keep busy. Harlon Nayl followed us out, and walked to the edge of the safety cage to stare out into the foggy depths of the hive.

Carl Thonius lingered in the hatchway, paying the pilot his fee and tip, and making arrangements for future services. Harlon and Kara were both dressed in bodygloves and heavy jackets, but Carl Thonius was, as ever, clad in exquisite, fashionable garments: buckled wedge shoes, black velvet pantaloons, a tailored jacket of grey damask tight around his thin ribs, a high collar tied with a silk bow and set with a golden pin. He was twenty-four years old, blond-haired, rather plain of face, but striking in his poise and manners.

I had thought him too much of a dandy when the ordos first submitted him as a possible interrogator, but had quickly realised that behind the foppish, mannered exterior lay a quite brilliant analytical mind. His rank marked him out amongst my retainers. The others – Nayl and Kara, for example – were individuals I hired because of their skills and talents. But

Carl was an inquisitor in training. One day, he would aspire to the office and signet of the sublime ordos. His service to me, as interrogator, was his apprenticeship, and every inquisitor took on at least one interrogator, training them for the duty ahead. I had been Gregor Eisenhorn's interrogator, and had learned an immeasurable amount from that great man. I had no doubt that, in a few years, Carl Thonius would be well on his way to that distinguished rank.

Of course, for reasons I could not have ever imagined, that would not be the case. Hindsight is a worthless toy.

Wystan Frauka emerged from the lander, lighting his latest lho-stick from the stub of the last. He had his limiter turned on, of course, and it would remain on until I told him otherwise. He looked bored, as usual, detached. He wandered over to where a servitor was unloading our luggage from the lander's aft belly-hatch and looked for his belongings.

Harlon remained at the edge of the safety cage, deep in thought. A heavyset man, thick with corded muscle, his head shaved, he had a dominating presence. Born on Loki, he'd been a bounty hunter for many years before gaining employment with my mentor Eisenhorn because of his skills. I had inherited him, so to speak. There was no man I would rather have at my side in a fight. But I wondered if Harlon Nayl *was* at my side any more. Not since... the event. I'd heard him talk about 'going back to the old game', his defeated tone the same as Cynia Preest's. If it came down to it, I would let him go.

But I would miss him.

Kara Swole trundled me over to the gantry edge until we were facing the safety basket too. We stared out across the city.

'See anything you like?' she asked. She was trying to be light and funny, but I could taste the pain in her voice.

'We'll find something here, I promise,' I said, my voice synthesised, expressionless, through the mechanical vox-ponder built into my support chair. I hadn't mind-talked to any of them for a long time, not since Majeskus, probably. I despised the voxponder's menacing flatness, but telepathy seemed too intimate, too intrusive at a time when thoughts were raw and private.

'We'll find something here,' I repeated. 'Something worth finding.'

Kara managed a smile. It was the first I had seen her shape for months, and it warmed me briefly. She was trying. Kara Swole was a short,

voluptuous redhead whose rounded build quite belied her acrobatic abilities. Like Harlon, I had inherited her from Eisenhorn. She was a true servant of the ordos, as hard as stone when she needed to be, but she possessed a gentleness as appealing and soft as her curves. For all her dexterity, her stealth, her confidence with weapons, I think it was that gentleness that I most valued her for.

Molotch had faded into the void after his crimes above Majeskus, leaving no trace. Sameter, benighted planet, offered us the vestige of a clue. Three of Molotch's hired guns, three of the men we had slain in the battle on the *Hinterlight*, had proved, under forensic examination, to have come from Sameter. From this very place, Urbitane, the planet's second city.

We would find their origins and their connections, and follow them through every tenuous twitch and turn, until we had Molotch's scent again.

And then...

Carl had finished his transactions with the lander pilot. As I turned, I saw the pilot looking at me, staring at me the same way he and the other crew members had stared since they had first seen me come aboard. I didn't have to reach out with my mind to understand his curiosity.

The wounds of Chaos had left me a mangled wreck, a disembodied soul locked forever within a grav-suspended, armoured support chair. I had no physical identity anymore. I was just a lump of floating metal, a mechanical container, inside which a fragment of organic material remained, kept vital and pulsing by complex bio-systems. I knew the very sight of me scared people, people like the pilot and the rest of his crew. I had no face to read, and people do so like a face.

I missed my face. I missed my limbs. Destiny had left me one virtue, my mind. Powerfully, alarmingly psychic, my mind was my one saving grace. It allowed me to carry on my work. It allowed me to transcend my pitiful state as a cripple in a metal box.

Molotch had a face. A handsome visor of flesh that was, in its way, as impassive as my sleek, matt-finished metal. The only expression it ever conveyed was a delight in cruelty. I would take great pleasure in burning it off his shattered skull.

'Do we have the names and physiologies?' I asked.

'Nayl's got them,' Kara replied.

'Harlon?'

He turned and walked over to join us, pulling a data-slate from the hip-pocket of his long, mesh-weave coat.

He flipped it on.

‘Victor Zhan. Noble Soto. Goodman Frell. Biogs, traces, taints and histories. All present and correct.’

‘Let’s do what we came here to do,’ I said.

III

Oubliette. A place where things or persons are put so that they may be forgotten about. Or, as Patience preferred to think, a place where one might sit awhile and forget.

The scholam’s oubliette was a cavity under the lower hall, fitted with a bolted hatch. There was no light, and vermin scuttled around in the wet shadows. It was the punishment place, the area where those pupils who had committed the worst infractions were sent by the rigorists. But it was also one of the few places in the Kindred Youth Scholam where a pupil could enjoy some kind of privacy.

According to its register, the scholam was home to nine hundred and seventy-six young people, most of them slum orphans. There were thirty-two tutors, all privately employed, and another forty servants and ancillary staff, including a dozen men, all ex-Guard, known as the *rigorists*, whose duties were security and discipline.

Life in the scholam was austere. The old tower, built centuries earlier for some purpose no one could now remember, was chilly and damp. The tower itself clung for support to the side of a neighbouring stack, like a climbing plant against a wall. The floors of its many storeys were cold ouslite dressed with rush-fibre, the walls lime-washed and prone to trickles of condensation. A murmur from the lower levels reminded the inhabitants that there was a furnace plant working down there, but it was the only clue, for no heat ever issued from the thumping pipework or the corroded radiators.

The regime was strict. An early rise, prayers, and an hour of ritual examination before breakfast, which was taken at sunrise. The morning was spent performing the many chores of the scholam – scrubbing floors, washing laundry, helping in the kitchen – and the afternoon was filled with academic classes. After supper, more prayers, ablutions in the freezing wash-house, and then two hours of liturgical study by lamplight.

Occasionally, trusted older pupils were allowed to accompany tutors out of the tower on trips into the nearby regions of the hive, to help carry purchased food stocks, fabrics, ink, oil and all the other sundry materials necessary to keep the scholam running. They were a distinctive sight in the busy streets of the western stacks: a grim, robed tutor leading a silent, obedient train of uniformed scholars, each one laden down by bundles, bales, bags and cartons. Every pupil wore a uniform, a unisex design in drab grey with the initials of the scholam stitched onto the back.

Few pupils ever complained about the slender comfort of their lives, because almost all of them had volunteered for it. Strict it might be, but life in the Kindred Youth Scholam was preferable to the alternative outside in the tracts. Existence in the wastelands west of the hive offered a lean choice: scavenge like an animal, or bond into a gang. Either way, life expectancy was miserably low. Municipally sponsored scholams, offering a bed, food and a basic education that emphasised the values of the Throne, represented an escape route. Reasonably healthy, lice-free, qualified youngsters could leave such institutions with a real prospect of securing an apprenticeship to one of the hive guilds, a journeyship, or at least a decent indenture.

Patience had been at the scholam for twelve years, which meant she was twenty-two or twenty-three years old and by far the oldest pupil registered at that time. Most pupils left the care of the charity around their majority, when their age gave them a legal identity in the eyes of the guilds. But Patience had stayed on because of her sisters. Twins, Providence and Prudence were fifteen, and Patience had promised them she would stay and look after them until they turned eighteen. It was a promise she'd made to her sisters, and to her dying mother, the day their mother had brought the three of them to the scholam and asked the tutors to take them in.

Patience was not her birth name, no more than Prudence's was Prudence or Providence's Providence. They were scholam names, given to each pupil at their induction, symbolic of the fresh start they were making.

Except for Patience, few pupils were made to suffer the oubliette. She had now been in there nineteen times.

On this occasion, she was in for breaking the nose of Tutor Abelard. She'd punched the odious creep for criticising her work in the laundry. The crack of cartilage and the puff of blood had been very satisfying.

Cooling down, in the dark, Patience recognised that it had been foolish to strike the tutor. Just another mark against her record. For this, she was missing the graduation supper taking place in the vaults many floors up. There was an event like it every few months, when distinguished men of consequence – guild masters, merchants, manufactory directors and mill owners – came to the scholam to meet and examine the older pupils, making selections from the best and contracting apprenticeships. By morning, Patience knew, many of her long-term friends would have left the scholam forever to begin new lives in the teeming stacks of Urbitane. The fact was, she'd been there too long. She was too old to be contained by the scholam, even by the hardline rigorists, and that was why she kept running into trouble. If it hadn't been for her promise, and her two, beloved sisters, she'd have been apprenticed to a hive mill long since. Something bristly and locomoting on more than four legs scuttled across her bare hand. With a twitch of her gift, she hurled it away into the darkness.

Her gift. Only she had it. Her sisters showed no sign of it. Patience never used her gift in front of the tutors, and she was fairly certain they knew nothing about it.

It was a mind thing. She could move things by thinking about them. She'd discovered she could do it the day her mother left them at the scholam gates. Patience had been practising ever since.

In the dark of the black stone cell, Patience tried to picture her mother's face, but couldn't. She could remember a warm smell, slightly unwashed but reassuring, a strong embrace, a hacking cough that presaged mortality.

The face, though, the face...

It had been a long time. Unable to form the image in her head, Patience turned her mind to something else. Her name. Not Patience. Her real name. The tutors had tried to rid her of it, forcing her to change her identity, but she still hung on to it. It was the one private piece of her that nothing and no one could ever steal. Her true name.

It kept her alive. The very thought of it kept her going.

The irony was, she could leave the oubliette whenever she chose. A simple flick of her gift would throw back the bolt and allow her to lift the trapdoor. But that would give her away, convince the tutors she was abnormal.

Patience reined her mind in and sat still in the darkness. Someone was coming. Coming to let her out.

IV

Harlon Nayl's eyes didn't so much as blink as the fist came at him. His left hand went out, tilting inwards, captured the man's arm neatly around the inside of the wrist, and wrenched it right around through two hundred degrees. A bone may have snapped, but if it did, the sound was masked by the man's strangled squeal, a noise which ended suddenly as Nayl's other hand connected with his face.

The man – a thickset lhotas-eater with a mucus problem – shivered the deck as he hit it. Nayl kept hold of his wrist, pulling the man's arm straight and tight while he stood firmly on his armpit. This position allowed for significant leverage, and Nayl made use of it. Harlon was in a take-no-prisoners mood, I sensed, which was hardly useful given our objective.

A little leverage and rotation. A ghastly scream, vocalised through a face spattered with blood.

'What do you reckon?' asked Nayl, twisting a little more and increasing the pitch. 'Do you think I can get top C out of him?'

'Should I care?' replied Morpal Who Moves with mannered disinterest. 'You can twist Manx's arm right off and beat him around the head with it, he still won't tell you what you want. He's a lho-brow. He knows nothing.'

Nayl smiled, twisted, got another shriek. 'Of course he is. I worked that much out from his scintillating conversation. But one of you does. One of you knows the answer I want. Sooner or later his screams will aggravate you so much you'll tell me.'

Morpall Who Moves had a face like a crushed walnut. He sat back in his satin-upholstered buoy-chair and fiddled with a golden rind-shriver, a delicate tool that glittered between his bony fingers. He was weighing up what to say. I could read the alternatives in his forebrain like the label on a jar.

'This is not good for business—'

'Sir, this is my place of business, and I don't take kindly to—'

'Throne of Earth, who the frig d'you think you are—'

Morpall's place was a four-hectare loading dock of iron, stock-brick and timber hinged out over the vast canyon gulf of the West Descent, an aerial thoroughfare formed by the gap between two of the hive's most colossal stacks. Beneath the reinforced platform and the gothic buttresses that supported it, space dropped away for almost a vertical kilometre to the base of the stacks. Ostensibly, this was a ledge where cargo-flitters and load-

transporters – and many thousands of these craft plied the airways of the West Descent – could drop in for repairs, fuel, or whatever else the pilots needed. But Morpal was a fence and racketeer, and the transience of the dock's traffic gave him ample opportunity to steal, replace, backhand, smuggle and otherwise run his lucrative trade. More than twenty men stood in a loose group around Harlon. Most were stevedores and dock labourers in Morpal's employ. The others were flit-pilots, gig-men, hoy-drivers and riggers who'd stopped in for caffeine, fuel and a game of cards, many of them regulars who were into Morpal for more than a year's salary each.

All this and more was visible from their collective thoughts, which swirled around the loading dock like a fog. I was five kilometres away, in a room in a low-rent hotel. But it was all clear enough. I knew what Mingus Futir had eaten for breakfast, what Fancyman D'cree had stolen the night before, the lie Gert Gerity had told his wife. I knew all about the thing Erik Klass didn't want to tell Morpal.

Wystan Frauka sat beside me, smoking a lho-stick, his limiter activated. He was reading a tremendously tedious erotic novel on his slate.

Surface was easy. Deep mind was harder. Morpal Who Moves and his cronies were well-used to concealing their secrets.

That was why Harlon had gone in first.

Morpal finally arrived at a decision. He had determined, I sensed, to take the moral high ground.

'This is not how things are done on my platform,' he told Harlon. 'This is a respectable establishment.'

'Yeah, right,' snorted Nayl. 'One last time. What can you tell me about Victor Zhan? He worked here once, before he went off-planet. I know he worked here, because I had the records checked out. So tell me about Victor.'

'Victor Zahn hasn't been around in five years,' Morpal said.

'Tell me about him anyway,' Nayl snapped.

'I really don't see any reason to do that.'

'I'll show you one.' Nayl reached his free hand into his hip pocket, took something out and threw it down onto the cup-ringed, grimy tabletop. His badge of authority. The signet crest of the Inquisition.

Immediately, all the men took a step back, alarmed. I felt Morpal's mind start in dismay. This was the kind of trouble no one wanted.

Unless...

‘Damn it,’ I said.

Frauka looked up from the midst of his book’s latest loveless tryst. ‘What’s up?’

‘Morpai Who Moves is about to make a miscalculation.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Frauka, and turned back to his novel.

Morpai had run the dock for forty-six years. For all his misdeeds and misdemeanours, some of them serious, he’d never run foul of the law, apart from the odd fine or reprimand. He actually thought he could deal with this and get away with it.

+Harlon. Morpai’s signal will be a double finger-click. Your immediate threat is the grey-haired gig-man to your left, who has a dart-knife. To his right, in the leather apron, the rigger has a pivot-gun, but he will not be able to draw it as fast. The flit-pilot in green wants to prove himself to Morpai, and he won’t hesitate. His friend, the one with the obscura-tinted eyes, is less confident, but he has a boomgun in his cab.+

‘Well?’ Harlon Nayl asked.

Morpai Who Moves clicked both middle fingers.

I flinched at the sudden flare of adrenaline and aggression. A great part of it came from Nayl.

The rigger in the leather apron had drawn his pivot-gun, but Nayl had already stoved the table in with the face of the grey-haired gig-man and relieved him of his dart-knife. Nayl threw himself around as the pilot in green lunged forwards, and slam-kicked him in the throat. The pilot went down, choking, his larynx crushed, as the pivot-gun finally boomed. The home-made round whipped high over Nayl’s head as he rolled and triggered the dart-knife. The spring-propelled blade speared the rigger through the centre of his leather apron, and he fell over on his back, clawing at his belly. Others ploughed in, one striking Nayl in the ribs with an eight wrench. ‘Ow!’ Nayl grunted, and laid the man out. The obscura fiend was running across the platform towards his hoy. Nayl threw another man aside, and grabbed the edges of Morpai’s buoy-chair. The Mover yelled in dismay as Nayl slung the frictionless chair sideways. It sped across the platform like a quoit, knocking two of the stevedores over, and slammed hard against the dock’s restraining rail. The serious impact dazed Morpai. He slumped forwards.

Nayl backfisted a man in the nose, and then punched out another who was trying to flee anyway. Two front teeth flew into the air. The obscura

fiend had his hoy's door open, reaching in.

A stevedore with a hatchet swung at Nayl, forcing him to jump back. Nayl blocked the next swing with his forearm, fractured the man's sternum with a jab, and threw him with a crash into the nearby row of porcelain samovars.

The obscura addict turned from his cab and racked the grip of his boomgun. He brought it up to fire.

Nayl slid the Hecuter 10 from his bodyglove, and calmly shot him through the head at fifteen metres.

Blood splashed up the rusted fender of the hoy. The man cannoned backwards, dropping the boomgun from dead fingers.

The rest of them scattered.

Kara ran onto the platform, her weapon raised. It had taken her just thirty seconds to move out of cover at my command to back up Nayl, but the fight was already done.

'Don't leave any for me, then,' she complained.

'You should have been here,' Nayl said. He walked over to the rig, and picked up the fallen boomgun, examining it.

'Nice,' he said.

+Harlon...+

Nayl looked over at Morpal, who was just coming round, the back of his buoy-chair rammed against the platform's rail. He saw Nayl, saw him aiming the weapon...

+Harlon! No!+

But Nayl's blood was up. The need for vengeance, suppressed for so long, was finally finding an outlet.

Nayl fired. Morpal had ducked. The shot exploded the seat-back above him, and the rail behind. The force of the impact drove the buoy-chair backwards.

Intact, unscathed, but still sitting in his chair, Morpal Who Moves went backwards, toppled, and fell into the inter-stack gulf.

'Well, damn,' Nayl hissed.

+For Throne's sake, Nayl! I told you not to—+

Thonius had just walked into the hotel room behind me.

'Good book?' he asked Frauka.

'Saucy,' Frauka replied, not looking up.

+Nayl's just ruined our lead.+

‘Never mind,’ Thonius grinned, a smug satisfaction on his face. ‘It was pointless anyway. I’ve found a much better one.’

V

She knew for certain it was Rigorist Knill even before he opened the oubliette hatch. Just part of her gift, the same thing that allowed her to win at cards or guess which hand a coin was in.

‘Come, you,’ he said. A glow-globe coded to Knill’s bio-trace bobbed at his shoulder, and cast its cheap yellow light into the cell.

Patience got up and stepped out into the hallway, making a big show of dusting down her garments.

‘They’ll be dirtier yet,’ Knill remarked, closing the heavy, black iron door. ‘The dinner’s over, and the Prefect wants the pots doing.’ Knill chuckled and pushed her down the hallway. The glow-globe followed obediently.

There was little to like about Rigorist Knill. In his days as an Imperial Guardsman, he had been big and powerful, but age and a lack of exercise had sunk his muscles into slabby fat, hunching him over. His teeth were black pegs, and a scarred, concave section of his skull explained both the end of his soldiering career and his simpleton’s nature. Knill was proud of his past, and still wore his medal on his chest. He liked to regale the pupils with accounts of the glorious actions he had seen, and got angry when they mocked him and pointed out inconsistencies in his stories. But he wasn’t the worst by a long way. Skinny Rigorist Souzerin had such a short temper and love of the flail that the pupils believed he had once been a commissar. Rigorist Ocell was rather too fond of the younger girls. And then there was Rigorist Ide, of course.

‘So I’m to wash pots?’ Patience asked.

‘Get on,’ Knill grumbled, and gave her a cuff. Like all the rigorists, Knill wore a knotted leather flail and a longer wooden baton suspended from his wide leather belt. The flail was for minor punishments, the baton a more serious disciplinary tool. Knill, who trusted his fists, seldom used either. Many of Prefect Cyrus’ long morning sermons revolved around the symbology of the rigorists’ twin instruments, likening them to the paired heads of the holy aquila, voices of different pitch and measure through which the dogmas of the Golden Throne might be communicated in

complementary ways. In the Kindred Youth Scholam, most lessons seemed to require some corporal component.

They ascended the draughty stone stairs, and passed through the unlit lesson halls of the seventh remove. The narrow hallways between classrooms were formed by partly glazed wooden partitions. The glass in the frames was stained the colour of tobacco by the passage of the years.

Then Knill unlocked the door to the next ascent.

‘I thought I was wanted for scullion duties,’ Patience said.

‘The Prefect would clap eyes on you first,’ replied Knill, and jerked his head upwards.

Patience sighed, and began to trudge up the winding stairs ahead of Knill’s light. She knew what that meant. A quiz from the Prefect on the error of her ways. If she was lucky, she’d get away with an apology to Tutor Abelard, and a few *Lachrymose Mea* in the chapel under the Prefect’s instruction before she spent the night in the potroom, freezing her hands in the greasy sop-tubs.

If she was unlucky, there would be Souzerin and his flail. Or Ide.

It took them over twenty minutes to climb the meandering tower to the upper vaults. In the main chamber there, servants and a few chosen pupils were clearing the last dregs of the feast. The air was still warm, and scented with rich cooking smells. Prefect Cyrus did not stint when important visitors came to the scholam. He even provided wine and amasec, and did not complain when manufactory directors lit up pipes and lho-sticks. Patience could smell the spicy smoke lingering in the long room. Two young pupils from the sixth remove were team-folding the white cloths from the feast tables. A tutor, Runciman, was supervising them, and explaining the geometry of the correct fold-angles.

‘Wait,’ Knill told her, and left her in the doorway. He shambled off down the length of the long, beamed hall, his light tagging along after him like a willowisp. Patience waited, edgy, arms folded. Three young children ran out past her, their arms full of candlesticks, napkin rings threaded around their tiny wrists. One glanced up at her, eyes wide.

Knill reached the far end of the room. Prefect Cyrus was sitting at the high table still, a swell-glass in his hand, talking quietly with a stranger in a dark red robe. One of the night’s visitors, a guildor or a mill owner perhaps. Clearly a man of wealth and breeding, well-groomed. He was listening to the Prefect intently, sipping something from a tall crystal beaker. To his left,

apart from the conversation, sat another man, another stranger. This man was short, but powerfully made, his cropped hair ginger in the lamplight, his bodyglove traced with silver. He was smoking a lho-stick, and gazing with half-interest at the ancient, flaking murals on the chamber walls. From her vantage point, Patience could see that the ginger-haired man wore an empty holster on his hip. Prefect Cyrus did not permit firearms inside the scholam, but that holster suggested the ginger-haired man was a bodyguard, a paid protector. The man in red was evidently even more important than she had first suspected, if he could afford his own muscle.

Then Patience saw Ide. The rigorist was standing at the far end of the chamber, waiting. He was staring right at her. She shuddered. Tall, strong, Ide was a brute. His eyes were always half-open, and he wore his white-blond hair in a long, shaggy mane, secured at the nape by a silver buckle. Ide was the only rigorist who never bragged about his Guard days. Patience had a nasty idea why.

Knill spoke briefly to the Prefect, who excused himself to the man in red, and walked down to the centre of the hall, Knill at his heels. The Prefect gestured that Patience should come join him. She approached obediently, until they were face-to-face.

Prefect Cyrus was anything between forty and four hundred. Slim and well made, he had undergone many programmes of juvenat work, making his flesh over-tight and his skin hideously smooth and pink. His eyes were violet and, Patience believed, deliberately sculpted by the augchemists to appear kind and fatherly. His blue robes were perfectly pressed and starched. When he smiled, his implanted teeth were as white as ice.

He was smiling now.

‘Patience,’ he whispered. She could smell the oil of cloves he wore to scent his body.

‘My Prefect,’ she answered with effort.

‘You flinch. Why do you flinch?’

She could not say it was because Rigorist Ide had just taken the first few steps on his way to join them. ‘I broke the rules, and committed an affront to the person of Tutor Abelard. I flinch as I await my punishment.’

‘Patience,’ the Prefect said. ‘Your punishment is over. You’ve been set in the oubliette, have you not?’ He looked around at Knill. ‘She has been in the oubliette all night, hasn’t she, Knill?’

‘That is so, Prefect,’ replied Knill with a nod.

‘All done, then. No need to flinch.’

‘Then why am I here?’ Patience asked.

‘I have good news,’ the prefect said, ‘and I wanted to share it with you as soon as possible. Good, good news, that I’m sure will lift your heart as surely as it has lifted mine.’

‘What is it?’

‘Patience, places have been secured this night for your dear sisters. Serving in the hall this evening, they so won the admiration of a merchant lord, one of our guests, he offered them indenture on the spot.’

Patience blinked. ‘My sisters?’

‘Have taken wing at last, Patience. Their particulars are all signed and contracted. Their new life has already begun.’

‘No. That’s not right,’ Patience said sharply. ‘They’re too young. They haven’t yet reached maturity. I won’t allow it.’

‘It is already done,’ the Prefect said, his face showing no sign of annoyance.

‘Then undo it,’ Patience said. ‘Right now! Undo it! I should’ve been consulted! They are in my charge!’

‘Patience, you were detained in the oubliette, for your own wrongdoings. I decided the matter. Your sisters are long departed, and I trust you will wish them well in your prayers this night.’

‘No!’ she shouted.

‘Shut your hole!’ warned Knill, stepping forwards, his light bobbing after him.

‘No need for that, Knill,’ said Cyrus. The Prefect gazed at Patience. ‘I am rather surprised by your response, Patience. I had thought you would be pleased.’

She glowered at him. ‘You cheated me. You knew I wasn’t around to object. This is wrong! They are too young—’

‘I tire of this, Patience. There is no rule or law that says girls of your sisters’ age may not be contracted. Such an agreement is in my power.’

‘It isn’t! You can only authorise a contract of employ in the case of an orphan lacking the appropriate blood-kin! That’s the law! I’ve only stayed here this long to supervise their well-being! You bastard!’

‘Take her away, Knill,’ said the Prefect.

‘Don’t even think about it, Knill,’ Patience warned. ‘I want his name, Cyrus. The name of this man who has taken my sisters.’

‘Oh, and for what good?’

‘I am of majority. I can leave this stinking tower whenever I choose. Give me the name... now! I will find him and secure the release of my sisters!’

Prefect Cyrus turned to Knill. ‘Another period in the oubliette, I feel.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Patience, backing away. ‘You can’t touch me now. Not now. I’ve stuck by the scholam’s frigging rules this long, one way or another, for the good of my sisters, but you have no hold on me! I am an adult, with the rights of an adult! Go frig yourself, Cyrus, I’m leaving!’

‘Double the period for that vile language!’ Cyrus barked.

‘Double this, stink-breath!’ Patience cried, making a gesture one of the pot-boys had taught her.

Knill lunged at her, arms wide. She ducked sideways, putting a little of her gift into the kick she slammed at the old soldier’s belly. Knill lurched away and crashed into a table, knocking pewterware onto the floor, anxiously steadying himself against the table’s edge in surprise.

Somehow, Ide had got behind her. The blow from his baton, swung two-handed, caught her across the back of the skull and dropped her to her hands and knees. Patience blacked out for a brief moment, and blood streamed down her nose onto the flagstones. She felt Ide’s big hand crush her left shoulder as it grabbed her.

‘Never did live up to your name,’ she heard Ide murmur.

Her name. Her *name*. Not Patience. The one little piece of her life she still owned entirely.

Ide was swinging the baton down again to smack her shoulders. She froze his hand. Ide gasped, sweating, terrified, as an invisible force slowly pulled his powerful arm back and drew the baton away from her. She let it smash Ide in the face.

He staggered back with an anguished cry, blood spurting from his mangled nose. Then she was on her feet, flicking her head back hard so that the blood from her nose spattered out in a shower. Knill was coming for her. So was the Prefect. Someone was crying an alarm.

Patience looked at Knill, and he flew backwards through the air, slamming into the table again so hard it went over with him. She looked at Cyrus, and snarled as she simultaneously burst all the blood-vessels in his face. He fell down on his knees, whimpering.

‘You bastards!’ she was screaming. ‘My sisters, you bastards!’

Ide swung at her again. He was crazy-mad now, trying to kill her. Patience held out a hand, and Ide went sprawling over on his back... and continued to slide down the length of the hallway until his skull crashed into the stone doorpost.

Rigorist Souzerin had appeared from somewhere, his flail raised as he ran at her. Knill was clambering to his feet.

Patience ducked Souzerin's first slash, then hurled him backwards a few steps with a twitch of her mind. She was getting tired now. Knill thundered forwards.

'I'll take that,' Patience said, and ripped the medal from Knill's tunic with a mental flick. She slapped her outspread palms against Knill's dented skull and blasted him away into the murals. The ancient plasterwork cracked under the heavy impact, and Knill fell limp onto the floor. Souzerin came in again. Knill's medal was still hanging in the air.

Patience whipped it around and buried it in Souzerin's cheek. He fell down with a wail of pain, blood pouring from the long gouge.

'I've seen enough,' said the man in the red robe.

The ginger-haired man rose to his feet and turned off his limiter.

Patience shrieked as her gift went away completely. It was as if her strength had been shut off. A hard vacuum formed and popped in her soul. She had never met an untouchable before.

Staggering, she turned. The ginger-haired man came towards her, his hands open and loose.

'Let's go, darling,' he said.

She threw a punch at him. She felt so weak.

He caught it, and hit her in the face.

The blow seemed effortless, but she fell hard, barely conscious. The ginger-haired man leaned over and pinched a nerve point that left her paralysed.

Blind, helpless, she heard Prefect Cyrus being helped back onto his feet.

'You were right, Cyrus,' she heard the man in red say. 'An excellent subject. An unformed telekine. The gamers will pay well for this. I have no objection to meeting your price of ten thousand.'

'Agreed, Loketter,' the Prefect sniffed. 'Just... just get her out of my sight.'

VI

Carl Thonius was patently pleased with himself. 'Consider the names again. Victor Zhan. Noble Soto. Goodman Frell. The forenames are all names, yes, but they're also all simple, virtuous. The sort of solid, strong, aspirational names a highborn master, for example, might give to his slaves.'

'These men were slaves?' Kara asked.

'Not exactly,' said Carl. 'But I think they're all *given* names. Not birth names.'

Carl had a particular talent in the use of cogitators and logic engines. Since our arrival, he had spent many hours in the census archives of Urbitane. 'I've been tracing the file records of all three men. It's laborious work, and the records are, no tittering at the back, incomplete. The names are officially logged and genuine, but they are not connected to any local bloodlines. Soto, Zhan and Frell are all common names here on Sameter, but there is no link between any of these men and any family or families carrying those names. In other words, I believe they chose the surnames themselves. They chose common local surnames.'

'Fake identities,' Nayl shrugged. 'Not much of a lead then.'

'Says the man who pushed our last decent lead off a kilometre-high ledge,' Carl mocked. Nayl gave him a threatening look, and the interrogator shrugged.

'No, not fake identities. The evidence points to the fact that all three men were orphans, probably from the slums. They were raised in a poorhouse or maybe a charitable institution, where they were given their virtuous forenames. On leaving the poorhouse, as young adults, they were obliged to choose and adopt surnames so that they could be registered on the citizenry roll and be legally recognised.'

'Odd that he employed three men with the same background,' Kara said. She could not bring herself to utter Molotch's name.

'Curious indeed,' I agreed. 'Carl, I don't suppose you managed to identify the institutions that raised them?'

'Throne, you don't want much do you?' Carl laughed. He beamed, like a conjuror showing off a sleight-of-hand marvel. 'Of course I did. And they all came from the same one. A darling little place called the Kindred Youth Scholam.'

Nayl left the hotel room almost immediately, and headed off to scare up some transport for us. For the first time in months, I felt my team moving with a sense of focus, so refreshingly different from the blunt-edged

vengeance that had spurred them since Majeskus. Carl deserved praise. He had diligently uncovered a trail that gave us refined purpose once again.

We had been so squarely and murderously outplayed by the heretic Zygmunt Molotch. I had been pursuing him for a long time, but at Majeskus, he stopped running and turned to face me.

The ensuing clash, most of which took place aboard my chartered starship, the *Hinterlight*, left over half the crew dead. Among them, trapped by Molotch's malicious evil, were three of my oldest, most trusted retainers: Will Tallowhand, Norah Santjack and Eleena Koi. Badged with their blood, triumphant, the bastard Molotch had escaped.

I had lost friends before. We all had. Serving the ordos of the Holy Inquisition was a dangerous and often violent calling. I myself, more than most, can vouch for the cost to life and limb.

But Majeskus was a particularly searing blow. Molotch's assault had been ingeniously vicious and astoundingly callous, even by the standards of such vermin. It was as if he had a special genius for spite. I had vowed not to rest until I had found him again and exacted retribution in full.

In truth, when I came to Sameter, I do not think I was an Imperial inquisitor at all. I am not ashamed to admit that for a brief while, my duty to the God-Emperor had retreated somewhat, replaced by a more personal fire. I was Gideon Ravenor, burning to avenge his friends.

The same, I knew, was true of my four companions. Harlon and Kara had known Eleena Koi since their days together in the employ of my former master Eisenhorn. Harlon had also formed a particular bond of friendship with the mercurial Will Tallowhand. In Norah Santjack, Thonius had enjoyed the stimulating company of a mind as quick and clever as his own. There would be no more devilish games of regicide, no more late-night debates on the respective merits of the later Helican poets. And Thonius was yet young. These were the first comrades he had lost in the line of duty.

Even Wystan Frauka was in mourning. Louche and taciturn, Frauka was an unloved, unlovely man who made no friends because of his untouchable curse. But Eleena Koi had been an untouchable too, one of nature's rare psychic blanks and the last of Eisenhorn's Distaff.

There had been a relationship there, one neither of them ever chose to disclose, presumably a mutual need created by their shared status as outsiders, pariahs. He missed her. In the weeks after Majeskus, he said less than usual, and smoked all the time, gazing into distances and shadows.

Aboard the hired transport – a small, grey cargo-gig with whistling fan-cell engines – we moved west through the hive city. Carl linked his data-slate to my chair's input, and I reviewed his information concerning the scholam.

It had been running for many years, ostensibly a worthy charity school struggling to provide housing and basic levels of education for the most neglected section of Urbitane's demographic. There were millions, nay billions, of institutions like it all across the Imperium, wherever hives rose and gross poverty loomed. Many were run by the Ecclesiarchy, or tied to some scheme of work by the Departmento Munitorum or the Imperial Guard itself. Some were missionary endeavours established by zealous social reformers, some political initiatives, some just good, four-square community efforts to assist the downtrodden and underprivileged.

And some were none of those things. Carl and I inspected the records of the Kindred Youth Scholam carefully. On the surface, it was respectable enough. Its register audits were a matter of public record, and it applied for and received the right grants and welfare support annually, which meant that the Administratum subjected it to regular inspection. It was approved by the Munitorum, and held all the appropriate stamps and marques of a legitimate charitable institution. It had an impressive portfolio of recommendations and references from many of Urbitane's worthies and nobles. It had even won several rosettes of distinction from the Missionaria.

But scratch any surface...

'You'll like this,' said Carl. 'The Prefect, he's one Berto Cyrus. His official file is spotless and perfectly in order. But I think it's a graft.'

A graft. A legitimate dossier that has been expertly designed to overfit previous records and eclipse them. Done well – and this had been done brilliantly – a graft would be more than adequate to bypass the Administratum. But we servants of the Holy Ordos had greater and more refined tools of scrutiny to bring to bear. Carl showed me the loose ends and rough edges that had been tucked away to conceal the basic deception, the long, tortuous strands of inconsistency that no one but the Inquisition would ever think to check, for the effort would be too labour-intensive. That was ever the failing of the Imperium's monumental Administratum. Overseeing hives the size of Urbitane, even an efficient and ordered division of the Administratum could only hope to keep up with day-to-day processing. There was no time for deeper insight. If one wanted to hide something from

the Imperial Administratum, one simply had to place it at the end of a long line of diversions and feints, so far removed from basic inspections that no Administtry clerk would ever notice it.

‘He’s older than he pretends to be,’ said Carl. ‘Far older. Here’s the give away. Three digits different in his twelve-digit citizenry numeric, but changed here, at birth-registry date, where no one would ever go back to look. Berto Cyrus was actually a stillborn infant. The Prefect took over the identity.’

‘Which makes him?’

‘Which makes him eighty-eight years older than his record states. And therefore makes him, in fact, Ludovic Kyro, a Cognitae-schooled heretic wanted on five worlds.’

‘Cognitae? Throne of Earth!’

‘I said you’d like it,’ Carl smiled, ‘and here’s the other thing. Its implications are not very pleasant.’

‘Go on.’

‘Given the scholam’s throughput of pupils over the years, very, very few are still evident in the city records.’

‘They’ve disappeared?’

‘That’s too strong a word. *Not accounted for* would be a better term. The ex-pupils have dropped off the record after their time at the scholam, so there’s no reason anyone scrutinising the school’s register in an official capacity should question it. Pupils leave, sign up indentures, contracts, hold-employs, but then these documents lead nowhere.’

‘From which you deduce what?’ I asked, though I could see Carl had the answer ready in the front of his mind.

‘The scholam is a front. It’s... laundering children and young adults. Raising them, training them, nurturing them, and then moving them as a commodity into other hands. The fact that the pupils are known only by their scholam names means that they can be slipped away unnoticed. It’s quite brilliant.’

‘Because they take in anonymous children, give them new identities to provide them with legal status, and then sell them on under cover of perfectly correct and perfectly untraceable paperwork?’

‘Just so,’ said Carl.

‘What do they do with them?’ I wondered.

‘Whatever they like, would be my guess,’ said Wystan, glancing up from his tawdry book. I hadn’t even realised he’d been listening. ‘Those three we’re tracking, they ended up as hired guns, probably because they were handy in that regard. Strong guys get muscle work. Pretty girls...’

‘Whatever else we do,’ I said, ‘we’re closing that place down.’

VII

The cell was a metal box and smelled of piss. The ginger-haired man opened the hatch and dragged Patience out. She tried to resist, but her limbs were weak and her mind muddy. The ginger-haired man still had his limiter off.

His name was DaRolle, that much she had learned, and he worked for a man called Loketter.

‘On your feet, darling,’ DaRolle said. ‘They’re waiting for you.’ He prodded her along the dim hallway. Patience didn’t know where she was, but she knew it was at least a day since she had been taken from the scholam by these men.

‘It’s Patience, right?’ the ginger-haired man said. ‘Your trophy name?’

‘My what?’

‘Trophy name. The scholam gives you all trophy names, ready for the game. And yours is Patience, isn’t it?’

‘Where are my sisters?’ she asked.

‘Forget you ever had any.’

Loketter, the man in red, was waiting for them in a richly appointed salon at the end of the hallway. There were other men with him, all distinguished older males just like him, sitting around on couches and buoy-chairs, smoking lho and sipping amasec. Patience had seen their type so many times before at graduation suppers. Men of wealth and status – mill owners and merchants, shipmasters and guilders – and Patience had dreamed of the day when one of them would select her for service, employment, a future.

How hollow that seemed now. For all their grooming, for all their fine clothes and fancy manners, these men were predators. The scholam which she had trusted for so long had simply been their feeding ground.

‘Here she is,’ smiled Loketter. The men applauded lazily.

‘Still in her scholam clothes,’ a fat man in green said with relish. ‘A nice touch, Loketter.’

‘I know you like them fresh, Boroth. Her name is Patience, and she is a telekine. I’m not sure if she realises she is a telekine, actually. Do you, my dear? Do you know what you are?’

Loketter addressed the last part of his question at her. Patience flushed.

‘I know what I am,’ she said.

‘And what is that?’

‘Trapped amongst a bunch of perverts,’ she said.

The men laughed.

‘Oh, such spirit!’ said Boroth.

‘And pretty green eyes too!’ said another man, swathed in orange furs.

‘The wager is seven thousand crowns per half hour of survival,’ Loketter announced.

‘Very high,’ said the man in furs. ‘What is the area, and the jeopardy?’

‘Low Tenalt,’ replied Loketter, and several of the men laughed.

‘Low Tenalt,’ Loketter repeated. ‘And the jeopardy is the Dolors. Although, if she’s nimble, she might make it to Pennyraker territory, in which case the wager increases by another hundred and fifty.’

‘How many pawns?’ asked a tall, bearded man in a selpic blue doublet. ‘Standard rules, Vevian. One per player. Open choice. Body weapons only, although I’ll allow a gun per pawn for jeopardy work. Guns are not to be used for taking the quarry, as I have no need to remind you. Gunshot death or disintegration voids the game and the pot goes to the house.’

‘Observation?’ asked a thin man in grey robes.

‘Servo-skull picter, as standard. House will supply eight. You’ll each be allowed two of your own.’

‘Will she be armed?’ Boroth asked.

‘I don’t know. Would you care to choose a weapon?’ Loketter asked Patience.

‘What is the game?’ she replied. More laughter.

‘Life, of course,’ Loketter said. ‘A weapon, Patience? DaRolle, show her.’

The ginger-haired man walked over to a varnished hardwood case set on a side table, opened it, and revealed the numerous polished blades and exotic killing devices laid out on the velvet cushion.

‘Choose, darling,’ he said.

Patience shook her head. ‘I’m not a fighter. Not a killer.’

‘Darling, if you’re going to live for even ten minutes, you’ll have to be both.’

‘I refuse,’ said Patience. ‘Frig you very much, “darling”.’

DaRolle tutted and closed the case.

‘Unarmed?’ Boroth said. ‘I’ll take the wager, Loketter. In fact, I’ll double you.’

‘Fourteen taken and offered,’ Loketter announced. ‘Taken,’ said a man in pink suede.

‘I’m in,’ said the bearded man Loketter had called Vevian.

Four of the others agreed too, opening money belts and casket bands, and tossing piles of cash on the low, dished table at Loketter’s feet. In ten seconds there was a thousand times more money in that baize bowl than Patience had ever even imagined.

‘Begin,’ Loketter said, rising to his feet. ‘Pawns to the outer door for inspection and preparation. Drones will be scanned prior to release. I know your tricks, Boroth.’

Boroth chuckled and waved a pudgy hand.

‘The game will commence in thirty minutes.’ Loketter walked over to face Patience. ‘I have great faith in your abilities, Patience. Don’t let me down. Don’t lose me money.’

She spat in his face.

Loketter smiled. ‘That’s exactly what I was looking for. DaRolle?’

The ginger-haired man grabbed Patience by the arms and marched her out of the room. They went down a maze of long, brass tunnels and finally up some iron steps into what seemed like a loading dock or an air-gate.

‘Go stand by the doors, darling,’ he said.

‘What happens now?’ Patience asked.

‘Now you run for your life until they get you,’ DaRolle said.

Patience put her hands against the rusted hatchway, and then pulled them away as the hatch rumbled open.

She didn’t know what to expect when she looked out. Beyond the hatchway, the shadowy wastes of the slum-tracts stretched away into the distance.

‘I won’t go out there,’ she growled.

DaRolle came up behind her and shoved her outside. Patience fell into the dirt.

‘Word of advice,’ called the ginger-haired man. ‘If you want it, anyway. Watch for the Dolors. They use the shadow. Don’t trust black.’

‘I don’t t–’ Patience began.

But the hatch slammed shut.

Patience got to her feet. Gloom surrounded her. A hot, stinking wind blew in through the nearby ruins, smelling of garbage and city rot.

Somewhere, something whooped gleefully in the darkness. A lifter rumbled overhead, its lights flashing. When she turned, she saw the immensity of the hive filling the sky behind her like a cliff, extending up as far as she could see.

She started to run.

VIII

There was something wrong with Prefect Cyrus’ face: a blush of burst blood vessels that even careful treatment with a medicae’s dermowand had failed to conceal. He was trying to be civil, and was clearly impressed by his visitor’s apparel, but he was also put out.

‘This is irregular, I’m afraid,’ he fussed as he led them into a waiting room where Imperial teachings were writ in gold leaf on the darkwood panels. ‘There are appointed times for inspection, and also for apprenticeship dealings. Take a seat, won’t you?’

‘I apologise for the difficulties I’m causing,’ Carl replied. ‘But time is rather pressing, and you came highly recommended.’

‘I see,’ said Cyrus.

‘And I have... resources to make it worth your while.’

‘Indeed,’ smiled Cyrus. ‘And your name is?’

‘I’d prefer not to deal in names,’ Carl smiled.

‘Then perhaps I should show you out, sir. This is a respectable academy.’

Sitting cross-legged on the old couch, his fur-trimmed mantle turned back over his shoulder to expose the crimson falchapetta lining, Carl Thonius beckoned with one gloved hand to Kara, who stood waiting in the doorway. Kara was robed and cowed like some dumb servitor, and carried a heavy casket. As she approached, Carl leaned over and flipped the casket lid open.

‘Lutillium. Twenty ingots, each of a weight of one-eighth. I’ll leave it to you to calculate the market price, Prefect.’

Cyrus licked his lips slightly. ‘I, ah... What is it you want, sir?’

‘Two boys, two girls. No younger than eleven, no older than thirteen. Healthy. Fit. Comely. Clean.’

‘This is, ah...’

‘I’m sorry, I’m being very direct,’ said Carl. ‘I should have said this before. This is a matter of *the most pleasant fraternal confidence*.’

‘I see,’ said Cyrus. Carl had just used one of the Cognitae’s private recognition codes, by which one graduate knew another. ‘I’ll just see what’s taking those refreshments so long to arrive.’

The Prefect bustled out of the room and hurried down a gloomy hallway to where Ide was waiting.

‘Bring the others in,’ Cyrus whispered to him. ‘Do it quickly. If this is on the level, we look to earn well. But I have a feeling.’

Ide nodded.

In the waiting room, Carl sat back and winked at Kara.

+The Prefect’s suspicious.+

‘Really?’ Carl said softly. ‘And I thought I was bringing such veracity to the part.’

+Get ready. Nayl?+

Harlon Nayl grunted as he drove another crampon into the crumbling outer brick of the tower’s side, and played out his line to bring him closer to a ninth-floor window. A terrible updraught from the stack-chasm below tugged at his clothing.

‘Ready enough,’ he replied.

+Harlon’s in position. Carl? You can do the honours.+

‘Thank you, sir,’ he whispered. ‘It’ll be a pleasure.’

Cyrus came back into the room, smiling broadly. ‘Caffeine and cusp cake is just on its way. The cake is very fine, very gingery.’

‘I can’t wait,’ Carl said.

+They’re closing in. Four now arriving at the west door. Three on the stairs behind Kara. Two more approaching from the floor above. All ex-Guard. Armed with batons. And I read at least one firearm.+

Carl rose to his feet. ‘Oh, Prefect? There is one other thing I did want to say.’

‘And that is?’ asked Cyrus.

Carl smiled his toothiest smile. ‘In the name of the Holy Inquisition, you motherless wretch, surrender now.’

Cyrus gasped and began to back away.

‘Ide! Ide!’ he screamed.

Kara hurled the casket, and it slammed into Cyrus’ midsection, felling him hard. He grunted in pain, and several of the heavy ingots scattered across the floor.

+Move!+

Kara threw off her drab robe, and flew forwards as the first rigorist came in through the doorway. Guns were forbidden in the scholam, but that didn’t prevent this man from carrying one. Weapon scanners around the entry gate screened visitors for firearms. But lutillium, apart from its monetary worth, had value as a substance opaque to scanners.

Rigorist Ide raised his handgun as he came in. Kara, on her knees, reached into the fallen casket and produced the Tronsvasse compact hidden between the layers of ingots.

‘Surprise,’ she said, and buried a caseless round in his forehead. The rear part of Ide’s skull burst like a squeezed pimple, and he fell on his back.

She got up, shot the sprawled Cyrus once through the back of the thigh to make sure he wasn’t going anywhere, and swung to face the door. The next two rigorists burst in on Ide’s heels, batons raised, and she shot out their knees. Thonius winced and covered his ears.

In the hall outside, the other rigorists backed in terror from the sound of gunfire. Then a shaped charge blew out the casement behind them in a blizzard of glass and leading, and Harlon Nayl swung into the hallway. He had a large automatic pistol in his left fist.

‘Any takers?’ he asked.

One ran, and Nayl shot him through the heel. The others sank to their knees, hands to their heads.

‘Good lads,’ Nayl said. He took a neural disruptor from his belt in his right hand and walked over to them, cracking each one comatose with a fierce zap from the blunt device.

In the waiting room, the air threaded with gun-smoke, Kara turned to face the opposite doors as other alerted rigorists crashed in from the stairs. Knill led them, and didn’t even blink at the sight of the small woman with the handgun. He flew at her.

‘Ninker!’ she complained, and shot him. The round penetrated his torso and didn’t slow him. He crashed into her and knocked her flat.

Souzerin and another rigorist named Fewik were right behind Knill. Fewik knocked Carl over with a blow from his baton, and Souzerin raised

the battered bolt pistol that he'd carried since his days in the Commissariat. He fired at Kara, but managed only to blow off Knill's left foot and his left arm at the elbow.

Nayl appeared at the opposite door, and yelled a warning that Souzerin answered by lifting his aim and blasting at the doorway. Brick chips and wooden splinters exploded from the jamb. Kara reached out from under Knill's dead weight, and shot Souzerin up through the chin. The rigorist left the ground for a moment, then crashed back down dead. Nayl reappeared, and put a round through Fewik's back as he turned to flee.

Nayl helped Kara out from under the half-dead brute.

'Nobody help me up then,' Carl complained.

Panic had seized the scholam. I could feel it, breathe it. Hundreds of children and young adults, terrified by the explosions and gunshots.

And a deeper panic, a deeper dread, that emanated from the minds of the rigorists and tutors.

I hovered towards the main gate, Wystan at my side, and ripped the ancient doors off their hinges with a brisk nudge of my mind. Inside the entrance way, half a dozen tutors and rigorists were running towards us, hoping for a speedy exit.

+I am Inquisitor Ravenor of the Holy Ordos! Remain where you are!+ I don't think they understood the manner of the command, though several involuntarily defecated in fear as the telepathic burst hit them. All they saw was a lone man approaching beside a strange, covered chair.

+Now!+

My psi-wave threw them all backwards violently, like the pressure blast of a hurricane. Windows shattered. They tumbled over, robes shredding, flying like dolls or desperately trying to grip onto the floor.

Wystan lit a lho-stick.

'What I like about you,' he said, 'is that you don't muck around.'

'Thank you.'

I had switched to voxponder and now I activated my built in voxcaster. 'This is Ravenor to Magistratum Fairwing. Your officers may now move in and secure the building as instructed.'

'Yes, inquisitor.'

'Do not harm any of the children.'

IX

I had expected to find many things within the scholam: evidence of abuse and cruelty certainly, damaged souls, perhaps even answers, if I was lucky.

I had not expected to find traces of psyker activity. ‘What’s the matter?’ Kara asked me.

+I’m not sure.+

We moved down the long hallways, past the frightened faces of pupils herded along by the Magistratum officers, past whimpering tutors spread against the old walls as they were patted down for concealed weapons. The traces were slight, ephemeral, fading, like strands of gossamer clinging to the brickwork. But they were there.

+There was a psyker here.+ Kara stiffened.

+Relax. He... no, I believe it was a she. She’s not here anymore. But she was here for a long time and she left only recently.+

‘When you say a long time, you mean?’

+Years.+

‘And when you say recently...?’

+Days, maybe less.+

We explored the tower. For Kara, this was a curious process. She could not see or feel, taste or smell the traces that were so evident to me. She just followed me around, one empty room after another. I could sense her boredom and her frustration. She wanted to be with the others, active, rounding up the last of the scholam’s inhabitants.

‘Sorry. This must be tedious for you,’ I said.

‘It’s fine,’ she replied. ‘Take your time. I can be patient. Patience is a virtue.’

‘Indeed.’

We entered a large dining hall in the upper reaches of the tower. The traces were strongest and freshest there.

‘Telekine,’ I said. ‘I’m in no doubt. A telekine, raw but potentially strong.’

‘We have to find her,’ Kara said. ‘If this damn place really was grooming subjects for the Cognitae, she could be a lead. A direct connection to a Cognitae procurer.’

Kara was right. Among their many crimes, the Cognitae prided themselves on recruiting and retaining unlicensed psykers for their own purposes.

‘Go and find Carl for me, Kara,’ I requested. ‘I want to get him working on discovering who this psyker was and where she might have gone.’

‘Because of the Cognitae link,’ she nodded.

‘Yes, because of that,’ I replied. ‘But even if no link exists, we still have to find her. An unsanctioned psyker, loose on Sameter. That cannot be permitted. We must track her down. And dispose of her.’

X

‘I’m sorry,’ Carl Thonius said. ‘Sir, I’m very sorry.’

The device was very small, no larger than a hearing aid implant.

‘I should have searched him right there, but with all the shooting and screaming.’

‘Don’t worry about it, Carl,’ I said.

‘I think I will, sir. Everything’s blanked.’

The device was a trigger switch, coded to Cyrus’ thumb print. An advanced piece of tech. Down on the floor, helpless from the wound Kara had delivered to his leg, Cyrus had plucked this device from his pocket and activated it. And the scholam’s entire data archive had been erased.

‘Can you recover anything?’ I asked.

‘It’s a fairly comprehensive wipe. I might be able to recode the last few days’ worth of material. The stuff most recently processed might still exist in the codification buffer.’

‘Do what you can,’ I advised. Privately, I was annoyed with his lapse. But we had, with the assistance of local law-enforcement, rounded up dozens of tutors and scholam elders, including Cyrus himself. And who could say what the poor pupils themselves might be able to tell us?

Besides, it was hardly surprising. Carl was so poor in circumstances of violence. I don’t believe he had ever fired a shot in anger, though he performed well enough in weapons drill.

‘I’ll get to work, sir,’ Carl said. ‘I’m so very sorry—’

‘So you bloody should be,’ Nayl snorted.

‘Enough, Harlon!’ I rebuked. ‘Carl is my interrogator and you will address him with respect.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Nayl replied, ‘when he earns it.’

‘Do what you can, Carl,’ I said. ‘But remember, your priority is to find out all there is to know about the unsanctioned psyker they had here. Who she was, where she went. She has to be found and dealt with, quickly.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As Carl moved away, the senior magistratum approached. His enforcement officers, clad in black and silver, were still clearing the scholam, floor by floor. I could sense his unease. He was an experienced criminologist, but he’d never had his entire station house requisitioned to assist the Inquisition before. He was terrified of screwing up. He was terrified of me.

‘Problems?’ I asked.

‘A few scuffles, sir. You’d rather taken the wind out of their sails.’

‘I want all the children to be given medical checks, and then safehoused until statements can be taken from them all. Inform the Administratum that welfare assistance will be required, but not yet. No one is to be rehoused or re-homed unless they’ve been examined. Why do you frown?’

The Magistratum started a little.

‘There are over nine hundred children, sir...’ he began.

‘Improvise. Ask the local temples for alms and shelter.’

‘Yes, sir. May I ask... is this an abuse case, sir?’

‘Indirectly. I can’t say more. The staff I’ll interview here, now. I’ll need some of your men to assist in guarding them while the interrogations are underway. Once I’m done, I will file charges, and you can begin to process them.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I’ll start with the Prefect.’

A Magistratum first-aider had patched Cyrus’ leg wound, and they’d shackled him to a chair in one of the refectories. He was in pain, and very frightened, which would make it easier to extract information.

Cyrus stared at me as I rolled in to face him. Nayl followed me in, but sat his ominous bulk down at the far end of the long table from Cyrus, a threat waiting to happen.

‘I... I have rights,’ Cyrus began. ‘In the eyes of Imperial Law, I have—’

‘Nothing. You are a prisoner of the Inquisition. Do not ask for or expect anything.’

‘Then I’ll tell you nothing.’

‘Again, you are mistaken. You will tell me everything I ask you to tell me. Harlon?’

From the far end of the table, Nayl began to speak. ‘His name is Ludovic Kyro, Cognitae-trained, wanted on five worlds for counts of heresy and

sedition...'

Cyrus closed his eyes as the words came out. We already knew his true identity. What else did we have?

'Tell me about Victor Zahn.'

Cyrus frowned. 'I don't know a Victor Zahn...' I was watching his mind. It wasn't the truth, but it wasn't an outright lie either. Cyrus didn't immediately recognise the name.

+Tell me about Victor Zahn.+

Cyrus blinked as the telepathy slapped him. My interrogative was accompanied by an image of Zahn's corpse in the *Hinterlight's* morgue, which I dropped into his mind like a slide into a magic lantern.

'Oh Throne!' he murmured.

'You know him, then?'

'He was a pupil here, years ago.'

+And Goodman Frell? And Noble Soto?+

Two more graphic images.

'Oh, Holy! They were pupils too. This was years ago. Five or more.'

'And you groomed them,' said Nayl. 'You and your staff. Groomed them like you groom all the poor strays who wind up here. Sold them on.'

'No, this is a respectable place and—'

'So respectable,' I said, 'that you wipe all your records so we can't see them.'

Cyrus bit his lip.

'Zahn. Frell. Soto. Who did you sell them to?'

'T-to a merchant, as I remember.'

Lie. Bald and heavy. And well formed, not just vocally, but mentally too. A layer of mendacity cloaked Cyrus' thoughts, like a cake of dried mud. A mind-trick, one of the many taught by the Cognitae. I had been expecting as much. For all his fear, Cyrus was still a product of that heretical institution, and therefore had to be unlocked with precision.

If I'd just burst into his mind telepathically from the outset, I might have damaged or destroyed many of his locked engrams. But now I had a solid lie out of him, and that lie revealed the way his mind-shields worked: their focus, their strengths, their inclination.

'Who did you sell them to?'

'I told you, a merchant. A free trader.'

+Who?+

He squealed as the psi-jab rattled his mind. He was utterly unprepared for the sharpness of it.

‘That was a demonstration of how things will be if you resist,’ I said. ‘Now I’m going to ask the question once more...’

XI

Patience heard the buzzing, not with her ears but with her mind, and slid into cover behind a crumbling rockcrete wall. Moments later, a varnished human skull hovered past through the gloom. Tech implants decorated the back of its cranium, and lights shone in its hollow orbits. A sensor drone, sweeping for her. She’d heard the bastards talking about them before her release. This was the first physical proof that men were actually after her.

Men. Hunters. Killers.

The skull hovered on the spot for a moment, circled once, and then sped away into the shadows. Patience stayed low. After another minute, a second drone – this one built around the skull of a dog or cat – skimmed past and made off in another direction.

She slowed her breathing, and deliberately encouraged her mind to do the sort of tricks that usually happened unbidden. She reached out. She could feel the area around her in a radius of ten metres, forty, sixty. The shape of the geography: the sloping trench to her left, the broken columns ahead, the line of burned-out habs to her right. Behind her, the sewer outfall pouring sludge into a cracked storm drain. She sensed bright sparks of mental energy, but they were just rats scuttling in the ruins.

Then she sensed one that wasn’t.

This spark was bigger, human, very controlled and intense. Right ahead, beyond the columns, moving forward.

Moving slowly so as not to dislodge any loose stones, she turned and began to creep away around the storm-drain chute towards a jumble of plasteel ruins. Her left toe kicked a rock, and it rolled away off the drain’s edge and started to fall. Patience caught it neatly with her mind and lifted it up into the silence of her hand.

The brief delay had been to her advantage. Now she sensed three or four human mind-traces in the ruins ahead of her. Not focused like the other one, feral. In the shadows.

Don’t trust the black, that’s what DaRolle had said to her. Trouble was, could she trust DaRolle’s advice?

She crouched low, and stayed there until she could see them. Ragged human shapes, barely visible, moving like animals through the ruins. Gangers, members of the notorious Dolor clan. She could see three, but was sure there were more. The hunter was closing from the right, now almost at the rockcrete wall.

Patience lifted the rock in her hand and threw it, sending it far further than her arm alone could have managed. It landed in the trench with a loud clatter.

The hunter turned and made for it immediately. She got a glimpse of a man in an armoured jack and high boots scurrying towards the lip of the trench.

Then the Dolors saw him too.

A pivot-gun roared, and the hunter was knocked off his feet. The gangers rushed forwards at once, baying and yelling, crude blade weapons flashing in their dirty hands.

The hunter's jack had stopped the worst of the ball round. He leapt back up, and shot the closest Dolor through the neck with his handgun. The savage figure spasmed and went down thrashing. Then the others cannoned into the hunter, and they all went over into the trench.

Patience started to run. She heard another shot behind her. A scream.

She scrambled over a rusted length of vent-ducting, and dropped into the cavity of a roofless hab...

...where a man was waiting for her.

Patience gasped. There had been no spark off him at all. Either he was shielded, or his mind just did not register to her gift like regular human minds.

He was tall and thin, clothed head to foot in a matt-black, skin-tight bodysuit. Only his eyes were visible through a slit in the tight mask, but she saw the way the fabric beneath them stretched to betray the smile that had just crossed his face. He held a long, slender spike-knife in each hand.

Patience stretched out with her mind, hoping to push him away, but the tendrils of her gift slipped off his black suit, unable to purchase. He lunged at her, the twin blades extended, and she was forced to dive sideways, grazing her palms and knees on the rough ground. She started to roll, but he was on her at once, the tip of one blade slicing through the flesh of her left shoulder.

Patience cried out, but the pain gave her strength. She kicked out, and as the man jumped back, she flipped onto her feet. She backed as he circled again. She could hear him chuckle, feel the blood running down her arm.

He lunged again, leading with his right-hand blade. She ducked it, and came out under his arm, but the other blade raked across the back of her right hand as she tried to fend him off. She punched at him. He struck her in the side of the head with the ball of his right hand, and knocked her onto the ground.

There was a rushing sound in her head. She thought of her sisters, and the mother she could no longer picture. In desperation, she lashed out with her gift, but the killer's black skin-suit again rendered him proof against her power. It was too slippery. She couldn't get hold of anything except—

The man stumbled backwards in surprise as the knives flew out of his hands. He might have been armoured against a telekine, head to toe, but his blades were good, old-fashioned solid objects.

Patience pulled them both in until they were slowly orbiting her body as she rose. It would be the matter of a moment to toss them both away out of the hunter's reach.

But she had a much better idea.

With a bark of effort, she drove them point-first towards his eye-slit and nailed his skull against the back wall of the hab.

XII

Carl Thonius knocked on the refectory door and waited for a response. From inside, the oddly modulated screams and yelps of Prefect Cyrus shivered the air. As he waited, Carl glanced around at the four Magistratum troopers guarding the hallway. They were clearly unnerved by the strange sounds of human pain echoing from the refectory. Carl smiled breezily, but got no response. He knocked again.

The screams ebbed for a moment, and the door flew open. Nayl peered out.

‘What?’ he spat.

‘I need a word, dear fellow. With the boss.’

‘Don’t “dear fellow” me, frig-face. Is this important? He’s busy!’

‘Well,’ Carl stammered. He was always edgy when he had to deal with the big ex-bounty hunter. ‘It is, sort of.’

Nayl sneered. ‘Sort of doesn’t cut it.’ He slammed the door in Carl’s face.

Carl cursed and knocked again. Nayl threw the door back open.

‘Don’t do that,’ Carl snapped. ‘Don’t treat me like that—’

‘Oh, go away you frig-wipe...’

Carl looked Nayl in the eyes. ‘Know your place, Nayl. You may not like me, but I am his interrogator. I want to see him now.’

Nayl looked Thonius up and down.

‘Balls after all,’ he said, grudgingly. ‘All right.’

Carl walked into the room. Cyrus was slumped forwards in his chains, wheezing, blood leaking from his tear ducts. Kara sat on a chair just inside the door, her face grim.

‘Carl?’ I said softly. ‘This isn’t really the time for an interruption.’

‘Sir, I’ve been trying to recover the lost data. The erased data. There’s really not much to get back, I’m afraid. I doubt we’ll ever find out what happened to most of the poor children laundered through this place.’

‘Your incompetence could have waited,’ Nayl said.

‘Stop ragging on him, Nayl,’ Kara hissed.

Carl shot Nayl a dark look. I could tell there was something more.

‘I told you I might be able to recode the last few days’ worth of material. Uh, recently processed material still existing in the codification buffer.’

‘Yes, Carl.’

He cleared his throat. ‘There was one item there. A record of a transaction made two nights ago. An older female pupil named Patience. Groomed by these bastards partly because of her spirit, and mostly because she was a latent telekine.’

I swung around to face him. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘A telekine?’

He nodded. ‘The recoding is pretty clear. I think she was the psyker you were looking for.’

‘Did you say her name was Patience?’ Kara asked quietly.

‘Yes, why?’ Carl replied. She shrugged. She was holding something back.

‘Kara?’ I nudged.

‘It’s nothing,’ she said. ‘Just, when you were looking around, for traces of her, you thought I was bored and I said—’

‘Patience is a virtue,’ I finished.

Kara nodded. ‘Yeah, Patience is a virtue. Spooky.’

‘Coincidence,’ Nayl muttered.

‘Believe me, Harlon,’ I said, ‘in the length and breadth of this great Imperium of Man, there is no such thing as coincidence. Not where psyk is involved.’

‘Duly noted,’ he replied, not caring or believing.

‘Where did this Patience go, Carl?’ I asked.

‘She was sold for ten thousand to a narcobaron cartel that purchased her for use in a game they like to play.’

‘A game?’ I asked.

‘The record implies this is not the first subject the scholam has sold to the cartel for this purpose. I say game, it’s more sport. They release the purchased child into the slum-tracts and then... then they gamble on how long he or she will survive. Once they send their hunters out.’

‘So what?’ asked Nayl. ‘They’ll clean up our little psyk-witch loose end without us having to break a sweat.’

‘If the records are true,’ I warned. ‘Consider this. There might be a game. There might be a narcobaron with a taste for barbaric gladiatorial sport. On the other hand, all those things might be a substitution code to conceal an act of purchase to a Cognitae procurer.’

‘I actually don’t know which would be worse,’ Kara said.

I turned back to Cyrus. He whined as my mind re-entered his. He was still weak and reeling from our initial session, and by rights I should have left him a while to be sure of getting accurate responses. But there was no time. An unsanctioned menace was loose somewhere, or already leaving the planet under close watch.

I tried a few key phrases – ‘the psyker’, ‘the telekine’, ‘Patience’ – pushing them at his mind in the way a child rams shaped blocks at a box, hoping to find the right hole to fit. He responded with various recurring words: *Loketter*, *the game*, *trophy worth...*

I wasn’t sure how hard to push. I wasn’t sure if I was slamming him back against the limits of truth, where there is nowhere left for sanity to go, or simply meeting some form of substitution. Substitution was another standard Cognitae mind ploy. Anticipating psychic interrogation, the brotherhood mnemonically learned to replace the details of true memories with engrammatic euphemisms. *Narcobaron*, for example, could stand for *procurer*. *Game* might stand for *purpose*. It was a simple but almost unbreakable deceit. Well schooled, a Cognitae brother could mask

memories with metaphors. He could not be caught in a lie, because he wasn't lying. The truth had been erased and replaced with other facts. Using such techniques, a member of the brotherhood might withstand the most serious psyk-scrutiny, because the truth was no longer there to uncover.

'He's giving me nothing,' I cursed, turning away. 'Unless it is the truth. Do you have an active lead, Carl?'

Thonius nodded.

Kara got to her feet.

'Let's go and find her,' she said. 'If the story's real, I mean if there is this frigging barbaric game actually going on, there's a girl out there who really, really needs help right now.'

'Throne! Let her die!' Nayl barked. 'Frigging psyker! What? What?' Kara and Thonius were already heading for the door.

'One life, Harlon,' I said as I slid past him. 'I learned many things from Eisenhower, but ruthlessness was not one of them. Thousands may die, millions even, unless Molotch is found and brought to justice. But any count of a million starts with one, and to ignore one life when there is still a chance of saving it, well, one might as well give up on the other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine as well.'

'Whatever,' said Nayl.

'Thank you for your vote of confidence,' I said. 'Kara, inform the Magistratum that these interviews are suspended until we return.'

XIII

The armoured manse did indeed belong to the man named Loketter, and nineteen counts of narco-traffic were outstanding on his name. The manse was a brass mushroom that dominated a long slope of rubble scree above the shadowland of the slum-tracts. Down here, with the monolithic bulk of Urbitane behind us, the immensity of the urban squalor and ruin was shocking to see.

The manse was ferro-armoured, and shielded, but our scanners lit with the buzz of electromag activity inside.

'Signals!' Kara reported. 'They're running drones out into the slum.'

'Can you track them?' I asked.

'Working...' She adjusted some dials. 'I've got a lock on nine. Covering a hex-grid twelve by ten. Map comparison... Throne, these archives are so old! Here we go. An area known as Low Tenalt.'

‘Details?’

‘Serious slum-land,’ Carl said, speed-viewing the data on his codifier. ‘Basically wreckage. High probability of gang activity. Territorially, the gangs are the Dolors and, to the west, the ruin-burbs are run by the so-called Pennyraiders. Magistratum advice is to avoid this area.’

‘Really?’

Carl shrugged. ‘Magistratum advice is a blanket “avoid the slum-tracts”, so what the hey?’

‘How far?’ I asked.

At the helm of the cargo-gig, Nayl consulted the gyro-nav built into the stick. ‘Eight spans to the Low Tenalt area from here, on boost.’

‘Do it,’ I said.

‘You don’t want to level this manse first?’ Nayl asked.

‘They can wait. This girl can’t.’

Nayl nodded reluctantly, and hit the boosters. He wasn’t in this like the rest of us were. Running low, like a pond-fly skating the surface, we zipped through the ruined landscape, skipping rubble heaps, ducking under shattered transit bridges, running fast and low along the brick-waste gouges that had once been hab-streets.

Everything was a grey gloom, caught in the immense shadow of the city. Such ruin, such endless ruin...

‘Coming up, point three,’ reported Nayl, hauling on the stick. The engines whined shrill. ‘Two... one... setting down.’

The gig thumped and slithered as it settled on the loose brick.

Carl, Nayl and Kara were already up, arming weapons.

‘Sit down, Carl,’ I said. ‘I need you to run scope from here.’

‘Oh,’ he said.

‘I want full scanner input,’ I said as I hovered towards the opening hatch behind Kara and Harlon. ‘Wystan can watch your back.’

‘You’re going yourself?’ Wystan asked, surprised. It was one of the few times I’d ever heard emotion in his voice.

‘Yes,’ I said.

Kara and Harlon looked at me.

‘Yes, I’m coming with you,’ I said. ‘Have you got a problem with that?’

‘It’s just—’ Kara began.

‘You don’t usually...’ Nayl finished.

‘This isn’t usually,’ I said, and powered out past them into the chilly gloom.

Nayl leapt out after me, his Urdeshi-made assault gun cinched high around his broad frame. Kara paused and looked back at Wystan and Thonius.

‘Lock the door,’ she grinned. ‘And don’t open it unless you know it’s us. Even then, keep your powder dry.’

She jumped out, raised her Manumet 90 riotgun, and ran to join us.

Carl swallowed. Wystan Frauka got up, and locked the hatch shut. He looked at Carl, lit yet another lho-stick and patted the handgun tucked into his belt.

‘I got your back, Carly,’ he said.

‘Great,’ said Thonius. He turned to regard the sweeping screens of the scanner, and adjusted his vox-mic.

‘Getting this?’ he called.

‘Loud and obnoxiously clear,’ Nayl crackled back.

‘A ha ha. Funny. Not. Move west, two hundred metres, then head north along the axis of the old fuel store. The drones seem to be gathering there.’

‘Thank you, Carl,’ I responded.

We moved through the wasteland. It was one of the few times my state allowed me speedier and quieter access than my able-bodied friends. Nayl and Kara followed, clambering over the dunes of rubble.

‘See anything you like?’ Kara said.

‘I don’t frigging believe we’re doing this,’ Nayl grumbled.

‘Move left. Left!’ Carl’s voice rasped over the vox. ‘I’ve got drones moving now. Gunshots.’

‘I heard them,’ Nayl said, and started away to the left.

‘Flank him wide, Kara,’ I said, and she moved away in the opposite direction.

‘Throne,’ I heard Carl say. ‘I think we were right. I think this is some kind of frigging game.’

I propelled myself forwards. Both Kara and Harlon were out of sight now, though I could sense them just fifty metres away, each side of me. The twisted ruins of the tracts rose up on left and right. I tasted lifesigns.

‘Hello?’ I transponded.

The Dolors appeared out of the gloom. Ragged, emaciated, filthy, feral. There were twenty of them.

Blackened teeth bared in wild grins. They raised their cudgels and spears and charged.

‘Your mistake,’ I said.

XIV

The barons were laughing. Most of them were drunk, or out of their heads on lhotas and obscura.

DaRolle looked up from the drone relay.

‘Have we got the bitch yet?’ Boroeth demanded.

‘You wish,’ DaRolle said. He walked across the lounge and crouched down beside Loketter.

‘What?’ asked the man in red.

‘New players just entered the game,’ DaRolle said.

Loketter sat up. ‘Show me.’

DaRolle held out his data-slate. ‘Three on the ground. A gig too, grounded there.’

‘What the hell is this?’

‘Problem, Loketter?’ asked Vevian.

Loketter rose and smiled. ‘Not a problem, but a bonus element to our game today. Look at your scans. See? Newcomers.’

‘Who the frig are they?’ Gandinsky blurted.

‘Interlopers,’ Loketter said. ‘House will pay two thousand for each one killed. Firearms permitted.’

The intoxicated crowd applauded this energetically.

Loketter looked at DaRolle.

‘The ones on the ground I can get these fools to mess with,’ he whispered. ‘You go and fry up this gig.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Find out who these fools are. Then burn it and every one on it.’ DaRolle nodded.

‘Pleasure,’ he said.

XV

Patience was still running. The Dolors, invisible in the shadows but everywhere now, were jeering and caterwauling, their strangled cries echoing around the ragged walls and shattered windows.

They were calling out to her, taunting her, abusing her with obscene words and suggestions, many of which, thankfully, were so choked by the

gang-argot they made no sense.

Occasionally, stones or pieces of trash came flying out of the darkness at her, and she deflected all those she could. Some found her, especially the stinging stone bullets launched from catapults and slings.

Her instinct was to head back towards the colossal city, but no matter how much ground she managed to cover, it seemed not to get any closer. Its sheer scale made the distance hard to judge. It was probably kilometres away still.

She reached the ruins of a manufactory, its ply-steel roof collapsed. Seas of garbage and rubble spread out from its eastern side, and she began to pick her way across the weed-choked waste. Behind her, she could hear the gangers scurrying through the manufactory ruins. A few missiles flew out after her.

A figure suddenly appeared ahead of her, across the sea of trash. A small male, or perhaps a female, who'd been in cover behind the remains of a yard wall, hidden by a chameleon cloak. Glancing up, Patience cursed as she saw a hunter drone that had obviously been shadowing her for several minutes.

Patience changed course, and began to run away from the figure. She ran wide across the overgrown trash. The figure started to follow, trying to cut her off, running hard, but neither made particularly good going. The trash and rubble was so uneven, so treacherous. Patience kept tripping, stumbling, turning her ankles.

As soon as the hunter appeared, the jeering from the invisible Dolors grew more ferocious. Catapult missiles and even the occasional arrow whipped out from the manufactory at the hunter.

The hunter – and it was clearly a female – stopped in her tracks, and produced an autopistol. She slammed in a clip and fired three times at the manufactory.

The shells must have been high-ex, because each impact went up like a grenade. Sections of the manufactory ruin blew in, and the Dolors went very quiet suddenly.

Patience was still running. The hunter put the gun away and resumed the chase.

A second drone zoomed into view suddenly, circled Patience once and then headed for the hunter. The woman stopped again, looking around

frantically as she reached for her sidearm. Patience half-heard her shout a question into her vox-set.

There was a loud crack, a peripheral flash of light, and the female hunter jolted suddenly as a las-round went clean through her torso. She crumpled without a sound.

Her killer appeared, directly ahead of Patience. She skidded to a halt. He was big, and wore segmented plating over a coat of green hide. A glowing augmetic implant covered one eye. He had a lascarbine in his hands. He stared at Patience for a moment, then put the carbine away in the leather boot over his shoulders. Then he drew a large dagger with a twisted black blade, and took a step towards her.

‘Make it easy now, and I promise you won’t feel nothing,’ he said. Patience was breathing hard from the running. It made it easier somehow to summon up her gift. The man thought the first couple of stones that came flying at him were from the gangers, but then more came, and more, larger rocks, pieces of trash, chunks of garbage. Debris started showering off the ground all around her, whipping at him.

He cried out, shielding his face with his hands, and backed away. She heard him cry again, in pain, as a greasy lump of broken-off machinery hit him in the chest. He staggered, trying to fend the blizzard away. Then a piece of cinder block caromed off the side of his head, and he fell to his knees, holding his head. Two more large rocks struck his face and forehead, and he slumped over entirely.

Patience sighed, and the rain of trash subsided, pieces bouncing off the ground as they landed. Silence.

She gave the body one last look, and started to run again. Behind her, in the manufactory, and all along the outer fence line, the invisible gangers started to whoop and holler again.

XVI

I had just seen off a second assault by the slum-gangers when I felt the telekinetic burst. Fierce, unfocused, not too far away.

‘Turn west,’ I voxed.

‘Understood,’ Kara responded.

‘I read that,’ said Nayl. ‘I just heard bolter fire from that direction too.’

I slid through the ruins, my mind wide open. There were psi-traces all around me, at least a dozen as close as fifty metres. Most were the feral

impulses of the hidden Dolors. But there. One other. Harder.

Two las-rounds struck the front of my chair and fizzled off harmlessly. I found the hunter as he was about to fire again, and picked him up. He yelled in fear as he left the ground, dragged into the air ten metres, twenty. Then I let him go.

I didn't even bother to watch him land. The sharp light of his mind went out abruptly.

'I heard shots,' Kara voxed. 'Are you all right?'

'Fine,' I replied. 'Kara, it is a game. An obscene hunting game. We have to find this girl, whatever she is, before they do.'

'Understood. Absolutely.'

Kara was about a third of a kilometre away to my right.

'I've got a drone active in your vicinity,' Carl told her over the link.

Kara acknowledged, and glanced around. That was when the two hunters, twins clad in silver-grey skin sleeves, pounced. One pinned her arms from behind, the other came at her with a chainfist. She rolled her body back, using the man pinning her as a back-brace, and bicycle-kicked the other in the face. He went over in the rubble, rolling.

But the man pinning Kara from behind rammed forwards and headbutted her in the back of the skull.

+Kara!+

Even at that distance, I felt her pain, and sensed that she had blacked out. They'd have her gutted before she could come round.

I knew I had no choice. I had to ware her. It wasn't something she – or anyone else I knew – enjoyed, but it was necessary. Besides, we had trained for this. Kara Swole was a particularly receptive candidate.

The wraithbone pendant around her neck lit up with psychic energy. Kara's body suddenly animated again, but it was me moving her. I had taken her physical form over, put it on like a suit of clothes.

Blank-eyed, Kara's body twisted hard and broke the pinning hold. She tore clear, landed well, and swept out the legs of the hunter with the chainfist so he went over on his backside.

Then she turned, raising a forearm block against the other's attack, following the block with two rapid jabs to his face and a side-stamp that caught and dislocated his right knee.

He howled in pain. Kara/I grabbed his flailing arms and swung him bodily around right into his partner, who was returning to the fight for the

second time.

The partner's forward-thrust chainfist, which had been sweeping at Kara/me met the ribs of his fellow hunter instead. The whirring bite-blades of the gauntlet weapon punched clean through the man's side in a shocking welter of blood and torn tissue. He screamed as he died, his whole body quivering in time to the rending vibrations of the glove's cycling blades.

His partner and accidental killer screamed too: in outrage and horror at what he had just done. He wrenched the glove out, but it was too late. His twin, a huge and awful excavation yawning in the side of his torso, stopped quivering, and dropped. A film of blood covered everything in a five-metre radius.

Berserk, the remaining hunter hurled himself at Kara/me. We leapt, boosted by a touch of telekinesis, and executed a perfect somersault over his head.

He swung around. But by then Kara/I had grabbed up her fallen riotgun. Her puppet hand racked the slide. A single, booming shot blew the hunter backwards eight metres.

We heard a sound behind us, and turned, bringing the pumpgun up. 'Steady!' Nayl warned.

'What are you doing here?' Kara/I demanded.

'You were in trouble, Kara!' he said. 'I heard it over the vox. I came as fast as I could.'

'What about the girl? What about the girl we're looking for?'

Nayl shrugged. 'Kara?'

'No, it's me, dammit!' I said with Kara's voice. 'Catch her for Throne's sake, I'm coming out.'

Nayl hurried forwards, and took Kara's limp form into his arms as I ceased waring her. She was semiconscious, and the trauma of being a ware subject would leave her disorientated and sick for a good while.

+Guard her, Harlon. In fact, get her back to the transport.+

'Where are you going?' he asked the empty air.

+To find the girl.+

XVII

Closed back into the womb-like nowhere of my support chair, I impelled it forwards again, trying to reacquire the raw psychic-pulse I'd felt before. I felt edgy. Having to ware someone was a curious thing to deal with, and the

feelings always left me conflicted. I was aware that the subject loathed the sensation, and it was also most usually done in moments of extremis, involving violence and furious levels of adrenaline. But for me it was a brief delicious escape, a cruel reminder of what I had lost. I despised myself for deriving pleasure from such painful, demeaning moments.

+Carl?+

‘Yes, sir?’

+Do you have a fix on me?+

‘Yes, sir. I’ve got two more drone tracks about half a kilometre ahead, converging. Please hurry, sir.’

+I’m hurrying.+

Back in the gig, Carl looked up from his scanner displays, fidgeting with his cuffs nervously. He looked at Wystan, who was reading his data-slate again.

‘Don’t you care?’ Carl asked.

The untouchable nodded at his book. ‘It’s just getting interesting.’

Outside, DaRolle scurried forward, keeping low behind a half-fallen wall. He checked the area, unshipped his laspistol, and deactivated his limiter.

Then he began to run, head down, towards the parked transport.

XVIII

Her breathing was coming in short, sharp bursts. Patience had run as hard and as fast as she could. There was at least one person very close to her now, but the psychic-trace was faint and hard to place. She was worn out, exhausted, and her gift was weak from over-use.

She clambered down into a cavity behind a ruined pumping station, crawling into a cave formed by the overhang of the fallen roof. She curled up against the back wall, her arms around her knees. Outside, the Dolors were still jeering and shouting, but it was more distant now. She’d gone as far as she could. Now it was just a matter of waiting.

Waiting for the end.

+Patience.+

She started, and looked around, not daring to speak.

+Patience. Stay calm. Stay where you are. I’m coming to help you. I want to help you.+

‘Where are you?’ she hissed in fear.

+Don’t speak. They’ll hear you. Think your answers.+

‘What do you mean? Where the frig are you?’

+Don't be scared. Try not to speak aloud. They'll hear you.+

'This is another trick. You're one of them! One of the frigging hunters!'

+No. Patience, my name is Gideon. I swear by the God-Emperor Himself I mean you no harm. I'm trying to help you. You're hearing me because I am speaking directly to your mind, psychically.+

'You lie!'

+Try me. Think of something I couldn't know.+

Patience closed her eyes and moaned softly.

+Prudence. And Providence.+

She gasped.

+Your sisters. You're worried about them. They were taken... wait... Yes, they were taken from the scholam. Without your consent.+

'Just kill me, you bastard, or leave me alone!'

+Please, Patience, don't speak. They'll hear you.+

I was moving fast now. The jagged ruins of the slum-tracts slid by me on either side. Rocks and catapult bullets occasionally clattered off my chair's armour. Where was she? Where was she?

+Patience? Can you still hear me?+

'Leave me alone!' she sobbed, crawling deeper into the damp cavity. 'I can't do this! I can't do this any more!'

+Yes, you can! Just keep it together! Focus! Focus on something!+

Patience twisted in panic, clawing at the sides of her head. I was scaring her. My voice. Something about my voice. Not just the fact that it was coming, disembodied, into her mind. Something else.

What?

As I steered my chair out across a long sea of trash and debris, I gently peered into her mind, into the panic and turmoil. Into the fear.

I saw it. It was my voice itself. I sounded like a middle-aged, well-educated male. Reasonable, polite, refined. Exactly the sort of man who had betrayed her for her entire life, her fellow pupils, her sisters. I saw she had formed a picture of me already. It was part Cyrus, part Ide, part Loketter, part some ginger-haired man. It was all of these, blended into one monster.

Immediately, I switched the focus of my telepathy.

+Kara?+

I found her at once, bleary and sick. Nayl was helping her along a rubble ledge back towards the gig.

'What?' she asked.

+I'm sorry, Kara, but I need to ware you again.+

'Throne, no!' she whimpered.

'She's had enough, boss,' Nayl said.

+It's important. Really important. I need her voice.+

Kara looked at Nayl and nodded wearily. He caught her as her wraithbone pendant flashed, and she fell.

I left her body limp in Nayl's arms, and put on her personality like a skin-suit. My psychic-voice became Kara Swole's soft, reassuring tones.

+Patience?+

'What? What?'

+Patience, my name is Kara. My good friend Gideon has asked me to talk to you. Time is very short, Patience, and you need to listen to me if you want to stay alive. Trust Gideon. Do exactly as I say.+

I could feel the girl giving way to panic.

+Patience, focus! Hold on! There must be something you can hold on to! Something you can hold on to so you can keep going! Your sisters, maybe? Your mother? Patience?+

She had found it at last. It was something so small and dark and hard in her mind that even my telepathy could not unlock it. She held on to it, tight, tight, as the dark closed in.

Her panic waned. Her breathing slowed. I was close now. I could reach her.

Patience opened her eyes. A skull, eyes bright, hovered at arm's reach in front of her, gazing at her. A drone.

I was too late. She had made too much noise.

The hunters had found her.

XIX

'Throne!' cried Carl, leaning back from his auspex station in alarm. 'What the hell did you do?'

'I might have broken wind,' admitted Wystan Frauka. 'Sorry.' He turned back to his book.

'Check your limiter, dear boy,' Thonius demanded.

'Why?'

'Why? I was just listening in, and Ravenor suddenly went offline!'

'The vox?'

‘The vox is still live! I mean his telepathic link just scrambled! Was that you?’

Wystan Frauka frowned and put down his data-slate. He checked his device. ‘No, it’s on. I’m blocked.’

‘Then what?’

‘Relax, Carly. I’ll take a look.’

‘Please—’ Carl began.

Frauka patted the handgun in his belt again. ‘I told you, I’ve got your back.’

‘No, it’s just... could you not call me “Carly”?’

Frauka frowned. ‘All right. What about “Thony” then?’

‘No!’

Frauka held up his hands. ‘All right. Throne! I was just being pally. The boss said I was too aloof. Too aloof, can you believe it? He suggested I should try being more friendly. He said it would help with team building, and—’

‘Frigging hell, Frauka!’

‘What? Emperor’s tits, you guys are so uptight! I’ll go look! I’ll go look! I got your back, remember?’

Frauka turned. DaRolle’s laspistol was aimed directly at his face. The ginger-haired killer grinned.

‘On a side note,’ Frauka said, ‘it would have been nice if you’d got my back too, Carly.’

XX

‘Out!’ said the hunter in grey-scale armour. He gestured with his double-bladed harn knife. Patience got up, and slowly came out of the pumping station cavity. The hunter’s drone circled her, purring softly.

‘Gonna fight?’ he asked. She shook her head.

‘Good girl. Step out here.’ She came out.

The hunter keyed his vox-link. ‘This is Greyde. I’ve got her. Game’s done. Tell Loketter that my master Vevian will want his winnings in small bills, so he can pay me off nice and handsome.’

The hunter looked at Patience. ‘Why are you smiling?’

‘No reason.’

He settled his grip on the alien blade. ‘Sure you’re not thinking of trying something dumb? I’d hate that. It’d make me take a lot longer with you.’

‘I won’t fight,’ Patience said.

‘Good.’

‘Because Kara told me I didn’t have to any more.’

‘Who? Who’s Kara?’

‘The girl who told me her friend was coming. She told me to have patience, because patience is a virtue.’

The hunter, Greyde, looked around edgily. ‘No one here but us, girl. No sign of any friend of yours.’

Patience shrugged. ‘He’s coming.’

A wind picked up, stirring the dust and the grit around them, billowing the filth up in swirling clouds. Like an exhalation from the sumps of the towering city.

Except it wasn’t.

Larger pieces of trash lifted and fluttered through the air. Pebbles rolled on the ground. It was like a hurricane was gathering over the slums.

No hurricane.

Alarmed, Greyde grabbed the girl, viced her neck with one powerful arm, and raised the harn blade to deliver the kill-stab.

+Kuming Greyde. I know you. I know everything about you. I know the nine counts of murder that you are wanted for, and the fifty-seven other killings you have on your clammy soul. I know you killed your own father. I know you understand only hard cash and killing.+

‘What? What?’ the hunter wailed in terror as the tempest of wind engulfed him and his prey.

+I don’t carry cash. No pockets. I guess it’s going to be killing then.+

I turned on my chair’s stablights, so I became visible as I ploughed in through the tumult of dirt and dust. The hunter screamed, but the dust choked him. Gagging, he threw Patience aside, and drew his Etva c.II plasma cannon, a pistol-sized weapon more than capable of burning clean through my armoured chair.

Staggering, half-blinded, he aimed it at me.

With a simple tap of my mind, I fired my chair’s psycannon. The hunter’s corpse slammed back through the wall of the pumping station. Even before it had hit the wall, every bone in that body had been pulped by concussive force, every organ exploded.

The wind dropped. Grit pattered off the sealed body of my chair.

+Patience?+

She got up. I wasn't using Kara Swole's voice any more.

+Are you all right?+

She nodded. She was singularly beautiful, despite the dirt caking her and the tears in her clothing. Tall, slender, black-haired, her eyes a piercing green.

'Are you Kara's friend?' she asked.

+Yes.+

'Are you Gideon?'

+Yes.+

She stepped forward and placed her right hand flat on the warm canopy of my support chair. 'Good. You don't look anything like I imagined.'

XXI

'So, we're dead? Yeah, of course we are,' Frauka said softly.

'You'd be dead already,' replied DaRolle. 'I just wanted to find out which bastard was running you. Who is it? Finxster? Rotash? That'd be right. Rotash always wants a slice of the boss' gameplay.'

'Neither, actually,' Frauka smiled.

'Frauka...' Carl began, terrified. He'd backed away as far as the gig's scan-console would allow, and even then knew there was no hope. This killer had them both cold. Carl wondered where he'd left his weapon. The answer – 'in the cabin lockers' – did not cheer him up.

'Who, then?'

'You won't know him. His name's Ravenor.'

DaRolle sniffed.

'Never heard of the frig.'

'Untouchable?' Frauka asked, casually indicating the limiter around DaRolle's throat.

'Uh huh. You too?'

Frauka smiled. 'Made that way, so help me. Still, the pay's decent. Always someone who needs a good blunter, right?'

'I hear that,' DaRolle grinned.

'Oh well,' Frauka sighed. 'Do me a favour, okay? Make it clean and quick. Back of the head, no warning.'

'Sure.'

'I mean, one blunter doing a favour for another? We gotta stick together, right, even if we are working for rival crews?'

‘No problem,’ said DaRolle.

‘All right,’ Frauka said, and turned his back. ‘Any time you like.’ DaRolle aimed his pistol again.

‘I don’t suppose...’ Frauka began. Then he shook his head. ‘No, I’m taking the piss now.’

‘What?’ asked DaRolle.

‘Yeah, what?’ Carl squeaked in frozen terror.

‘One last stick? For a condemned man?’

DaRolle shrugged. ‘Go on.’

Frauka took out his lack, set a lho-stick to his lips and lit it with his igniter. He breathed in the smoke and smiled. ‘Oh, tastes good. Real mellow. Want one?’

‘No,’ said DaRolle.

‘Real smooth,’ said Frauka, inhaling a long drag. ‘These things’ll kill you, you know.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that,’ DaRolle smiled.

‘I don’t frigging believe this!’ Carl whined.

‘Hey,’ said Frauka, glancing over his shoulder. ‘Why don’t you do him now while I’m smoking this baby? Save time. I never did like him.’

‘Oh Throne!’ Carl cried out and fell into a foetal position under the console.

‘Frig, what a baby!’ DaRolle laughed.

‘Tell me about it,’ Frauka said. He stubbed out his smoke. ‘All right, ready.’ He held up the squashed butt. ‘Know what that was, my friend?’

‘Don’t tell me,’ smirked DaRolle. ‘Best smoke of your life?’

‘No,’ said Frauka quietly. ‘It was delaying tactics.’

DaRolle swung around. The hulking shape of Harlon Nayl filled the hatch behind him. Nayl’s Hecuter 10 boomed once.

‘Everyone alive?’ Nayl asked, stepping in over the twisted body of the ginger-haired man.

‘Saw you approaching on the scanners,’ Frauka said. ‘Thought I’d keep him talking.’

Carl Thonius got to his feet, shivering with anger and fright.

‘You’re unbelievable, Frauka,’ he hissed.

‘Thank you, Carl,’ Frauka smiled, and sat down with his book again. ‘See? Now you’re team building too.’

I led the girl back to the gig, where the others were waiting.

‘Hello, Patience, I’m Kara,’ Kara said.

‘Good to know you,’ Patience replied.

By the time we raided Loketter’s manse, backed up by a full squad of Magistratum troopers, the narcobaron and his cronies had cleared out. There are warrants out for all of them. I understand Loketter is still on the run.

We returned to the Kindred Youth Scholam, and resumed the interrogations. It took several weeks, but by the end of it, I’d wrung some precious facts out of Cyrus and his staff.

There wasn’t much. No, that’s a lie. There was enough to ensure that Cyrus would face further interrogation at the Inquisition facility on Thracian Primaris, and enough to make sure the scholam’s tutors and rigorists would remain incarcerated in the penitentiaries of Urbitane for the rest of their natural lives.

And a lead. Not much, but a start. From Cyrus, just before his mind finally snapped, I learned that Molotch was heading for the outworlds. Sleef, perhaps. Maybe even deeper than that. I instructed Nayl and Kara to provision for what could be a long, dangerous pursuit.

The day before we were due to leave Sameter, I met with Carl in one of the scholam’s old, faded classrooms. Most of the staff had been shipped out by then, in Magistratum custody.

‘Did you trace what I wanted?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘It’s very little. With the records wiped—’

‘What have you got?’

‘Pupils Prudence and Providence were sold to a free trader who called himself Vinquies. The name was false, of course. No other records remain, and the name doesn’t match any excise log I can get from Sameter Out Traffic.’

‘The man himself?’

‘There was a picture in Cyrus’ mind, and in the minds of several of the other tutors present at the supper, but they’re not reliable. I’ve fed them through both the local Magistratum files and the officio itself. Nothing.’

‘So... so, they’re lost?’

Carl nodded sadly. ‘I suppose, if we dedicated the rest of our careers to trying to find them, we might turn up some clue. But in all reality, they’re long gone.’

‘I’ll tell her,’ I said, and slid out of the room.

Patience was in the oubliette. By choice. The hatch was open. She sat inside, in the semi-dark, sliding her hands over the stones. She was still wearing her torn and filthy uniform. She’d refused to take it off.

‘Patience?’

She stared out at me. ‘You can’t find them, can you?’

I thought for a moment, and decided it was better to lie. Better a lie now than a lifetime of hopeless yearning.

‘Yes, Patience, I found them.’

‘They’re dead, aren’t they?’

‘Yes.’

She coiled up, and I felt her hold on to that small black nugget in her mind again.

+Patience.+

‘Yes, Gideon?’

+I’m sorry. I truly am. We have to leave soon. I’d like you to come with us.+

‘With you? Why?’

+I’ll be honest. I can’t leave you here. You know about your gift? What it means?+

‘Yes.’

+You’re a psyker. A telekine. You can’t be allowed to remain in public. But I can look after you. I can train you. You could come to serve the God-Emperor of Mankind at my side. Would you like that?+

‘Better than an apprenticeship to a mill,’ she said. ‘Will Kara be there?’

+Yes, Patience.+

‘All right then,’ she said, and stepped out of the oubliette to join me.

+If you follow me, it will be hard at times. I will demand a lot of you. I will need to know everything about you. What do you think to that?+

‘That’s fine, Gideon.’

+I’ll be asking you questions, probing you, training your gift, unwrapping who you are.+

‘I understand.’

+Do you? Here’s a test question, the sort of thing I’ll be asking you. What was it that you held on to? When the hunters were closing. I felt it as a dark secret part of you, something you wouldn’t let go.+

‘It was my name, Gideon,’ she said. ‘My true name, my real name. It was always the single thing my mother gave me that I didn’t ever give away to the bastards in this place.’

+I see. That makes sense. Good, thank you for being so honest.+

‘Gideon, do you want me to tell you my real name? I will, if you want.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, not now, not ever. I want you to hold on to it. It’s your secret. Keep it safe and it will keep you sane. It’ll remind you what you’ve come through. Promise me you’ll keep it safe.’

+I will.+

‘Patience is a fine name. I’ll call you that.’

‘All right,’ she replied, and started to walk down the hallway at my side.

‘I’ll need a surname, though,’ she said at length.

‘Choose one,’ I replied.

She looked down at the monogram embroidered on her ragged scholam-issue clothes.

‘Kys?’ she suggested. ‘I’ll be Patience Kys.’

THORN WISHES TALON

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The past never lets us go. It is persistent and unalterable.

The future, however, is aloof, a stranger. It stands with its back to us, mute and private, refusing to communicate what it knows or what it sees.

Except to some. On Nova Durma, deep in the leech-infested forests of the Eastern Telgs, there is a particular grotto into which the light of the rising daystar falls once every thirty-eight days. There, by means of some secret ministry and ritual craft that I have no ready wish to understand, the blistered seers of the Divine Fraternity coax the reluctant future around until they can see its face in their silver mirrors, and hear its hushed, unwilling voice.

It is my fervent hope that what it has to say to them is a lie.

That night, the waste-world called Malinter had six visitors. They left their transport, dark and hook-winged, on a marshy flood plain, slightly bowed over to starboard where the landing claws had sunk into the ooze. They proceeded west, on foot.

A storm was coming, and it was not entirely natural. They walked through streamers of white fog, crossing outcrops of green quartz, lakes of moss and dank watercourses choked with florid lichens. The sky shone like filthy, tinted glass. In the distance, a pustular range of hills began to vanish in the rain-blur of the encroaching elements. Lightning flashed, like sparks off flint, or remote laser fire.

They had been on the surface for an hour, and had just sighted the tower, when the first attempt was made to kill them.

There was a rattle, almost indistinguishable from the doom-roll of the approaching thunder, and bullets whipped up spray from the mud at the feet of the tallest visitor.

His name was Harlon Nayl. His tall, broad physique was wrapped in a black-mesh bodyglove. His head was shaved apart from a simple goatee. He raised the heavy Hecuter pistol he had been carrying in his right fist, and made a return of fire into the gathering dark.

In answer, several more unseen hostiles opened up. The visitors scattered for cover.

‘Were you expecting this?’ Nayl asked as he crouched behind a quartz boulder and snapped shots off over it.

+I didn’t know what to expect.+

The answer came telepathically from Nayl’s master, and seemed far from reassuring.

‘How many?’ Nayl called out.

Twenty metres away from him, another big man called Zeph Mathuin shouted back from cover. ‘Six!’ echoed his estimation. Mathuin was as imposing as Nayl, but his skin was dark, the colour of varnished hardwood. His black hair was plaited into strands, and beaded. Both men had been bounty hunters in their time. Neither followed that profession any longer.

‘Make it seven,’ contradicted Kara Swole as she wriggled up beside Nayl, keeping her head low. She was a short, compact woman with cropped red hair. Her voluptuous figure was currently concealed beneath a long black leather duster with a fringe of larisel fur around the neck.

‘Seven?’ queried Nayl, as whining hard-round smacked into the far side of the rock.

‘Six!’ Mathuin called again.

Kara Swole had been a dancer-acrobat before she’d joined the band, and ordinarily she would defer to the combat experience of the two ex-hunters. But she had an ear for these things.

‘Listen!’ she said. ‘Three autorifles,’ she identified, counting off on her fingers. ‘Two lasguns, a pistol, and that...’ she drew Nayl’s attention to a distinctive plunk! plunk! ‘That’s a stubber.’

Nayl nodded and smiled.

‘Six!’ Mathuin insisted.

+Kara is correct. There are seven. Now can we deal with them, please?+

Their master’s mind-voice seemed unusually terse and impatient. Not a good sign. One of several not good signs that had already distinguished this night.

The two other members of the team sheltered against a gravel shelf some distance to Nayl's left. Their names were Patience Kys and Carl Thonius. A slight, fussy, well-bred young man, Thonius held the rank of interrogator, and was technically the master's second-in-command. He had drawn a compact pistol from inside his beautifully tailored coat, but was too busy complaining about the weather, the mud, and the prospect of death by gunshot wounds to use it.

Patience Kys suggested he might like to shut up. She was a slender, pale woman, dressed in high boots of black leather, a bell skirt of grey silk and an embroidered black leather shirt. Her hair was pinned up in a chignon with silver clasps.

She scanned the view ahead, and located one of the hostiles firing from the cover of some quartz rocks.

'Ready?' she yelled over at Nayl.

'Pop 'em up!' he replied.

Kys was telekinetic. She focused her trained mind, and exerted a little pressure. The quartz rocks scattered apart across the slime, revealing a rather surprised man holding an autorifle.

His surprise lasted about two seconds until a single shot from Nayl hit him in the brow and tumbled him leadenly onto his back.

With a spiteful grin, Kys reached out again and dragged another of the hostiles out into the open with her mind. The man yelled out, scared and uncomprehending. His heels churned in the ooze, and he flailed his arms, fighting the invisible force that yanked him by the scruff of the neck.

There was a blurt of noise like an industrial hammer-drill, and the man ceased to be, shredded into pieces by heavy fire.

Mathuin had shot him. His left hand was a burnished-chrome augmetic, and he had locked it into the governing socket of the lethal rotator cannon that he was wearing strapped around his torso. The multi-barrels whirled and cycled, venting vapour.

The firing ceased.

+They have fled for now. They will return, I have no doubt.+

The master of the team moved among them. To the uninformed, Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor appeared to be a machine rather than a man. He was a box, a smoothly angled wedge of armoured metal with a glossy, polished finish from which even the approaching lightning seemed unwilling to reflect. This was his force chair, his life-support system, totally

enclosed and self-sufficient. The chair's anti-gravity discs spun hypnotically as he advanced.

Inside that enclosing chair, one of the Imperium's most brilliant inquisitors – and most articulate theorists – lay trapped forever. Years before, at the start of a glittering career in the service of the ordos, Gideon Ravenor had been struck down during a heretical attack, his fair and strong body burned and fused away into a miserable residue of useless flesh. Only his mind had survived

But such a mind! Sharp, incisive, poetic, just... and powerful too. Kys had not met a psi-capable remotely strong enough to master Gideon Ravenor.

They were sworn to him, the five of them. Nayl, Thonius, Swole, Mathuin and Kys. Sworn and true. They would follow him to the ends of the known stars, if needs be.

Even when he chose not to tell them where they were going.

The Divine Fraternity practises a barbaric initiation process of voluntary blinding. Sight, as one might expect, is considered their fundamental skill, but not sight as we might understand it. Novices sacrifice one of their eyes as proof of their intent, and have that missing eye replaced by a simple augmetic to maintain everyday function. The one remaining organic eye is then trained and developed, using ritual, alchemic and sorcerous processes.

An initiated member of the Fraternity may therefore be identified by his single augmetic eye, and by the patch of purple velvet that covers his remaining real eye at all times except for circumstances of cult ceremony. A novitiate, self-blinded in one socket, must work to fashion his own silver mirror before he is allowed his augmetic, or indeed any medical or sterilising treatment. He must cut and hammer his dish of silver, and then work it with abrasive wadding until it is a perfect reflector to a finesse of .0088 optical purity. Many die of septicaemia or other wound-related infections before they accomplish this. Others, surviving the initial infections, spend many months or even years finishing the task. Thus, members of the cult may additionally be identified by blistering of the skin, tissue abnormalities, and even significant necrotising scarring incurred during the long months of silver-working.

It is also my experience that few Fraternity members have codable or matchable fingerprints. Years of scrupulous endeavour with abrasive wadding wear away hands as well as silver.

Overhead, the sky flashed and vibrated. Kara could hear the thunder, and felt the drizzle in the wind. Fog-vapour smirched out the distance.

With the toe of her boot, she gingerly rolled over the body of the man Nayl had shot. He was dressed in cheap, worn foul-weather clothes made of woven plastek fibre and leather. He had one augmetic eye, crude and badly sutured into the socket, and a velvet patch over the other.

‘Anyone we know?’ asked Nayl, coming up behind her.

Unlike the others, Nayl and Kara had not been recruited for ordo service by Ravenor himself. They had originally owed loyalty to Ravenor’s mentor, Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn. Somewhere along the line, a decade or more past, they had become Ravenor’s. Kara often thought of Eisenhorn. Stern, fierce, so much harder to bear than Ravenor, Eisenhorn had nevertheless been a good man to follow. And she owed him. But for Gregor Eisenhorn, she would still be a dancer-acrobat in the circuses of Bonaventure.

She often wondered what had become of her former master. She’d last seen him back in ’87, during the mission to 5213X. He’d been a wreck of a man by then, supported only by his burning will and fundamental augmetics. Some had said he’d crossed a line and become a radical. Kara didn’t believe that. Eisenhorn had always been so... hard line. She thought of him fondly, as she did the others from that time. Alizabeth Bequin, God-Emperor rest her, dear Aemos, Medea Betancore and Fischig.

They had known some times together. Great times, bad times. But this was her place now.

‘Face doesn’t ring any bells,’ she said. She reached down and lifted the eye patch, just out of curiosity. A real eye, wide and glazed, lay beneath.

‘What the hell is that about?’ Nayl wondered.

Kara reached up and slicked the short, red strands of her rain-wet hair back across her head. She looked across at Mathuin and Thonius beside the other body. Thonius was, as ever, elegantly dressed, and as he crouched in the mud, he fussed about his shoes.

Thonius was Ravenor’s pupil, which supposed that one day Thonius was to be promoted to full inquisitor. Ravenor had been Eisenhorn’s interrogator. Kara wondered sometimes if Carl had anything like the same stuff.

‘If you’d left him a little more intact, we might have made a decent examination,’ Thonius complained.

‘This is a rotator cannon,’ Mathuin said bluntly. ‘It doesn’t do intact.’

Thonius prodded the grisly remains with a stick. ‘Well, I think we’ve got an augmetic eye here too. And what’s either an eyepatch or a very unsatisfactory posing thong.’

Thonius’ caustic wit usually drew smiles from the band, but not this night. No one was in the mood for laughs. Ravenor, generally so forthcoming with his team, had told them virtually nothing about the reasons for coming to Malinter. As far as anyone knew, he’d simply diverted them to this remote waste-world after receiving some private communiqué.

Most alarmingly of all, he’d chosen to join them on the surface. Ravenor usually ran his team telepathically from a distance via the wraithbone markers they all wore. He only came along in person when the stakes were high.

+Let’s move on,+ Ravenor said.

The grotto in the Eastern Telgs is deep in the smoking darkness of the forests. The glades are silent except for insect chitter, and wreathed with vapour and steam. There are biting centipedes everywhere, some as long as a man’s finger, others as long as a man’s leg. The air stinks of mildew.

Once every thirty-eight days, the rising star comes up at such an angle it forces its pale and famished light in through a natural hole in the rock face outside the grotto. The beams streak in down an eighty degree angle to the azimuth, and strike the still freshwater of the pool in the grotto’s base, lighting the milky water like a flame behind muslin.

Brethren of the Fraternity cower around the pool – after days of ritual starvation and self-flagellation – and attempt to interrupt the falling beams with their silver mirrors. At such times, I have observed, they remove the purple velvet patches from their real eyes, and place them over their augmetics.

Their flashing mirrors reflect many colours of light. Having ingested lho seeds and other natural hallucinogenics, they glare into their mirrors, and begin to gabble incoherently.

Voxographic units, run on battery leads, are set around the grotto to record their ramblings. As the light fades again, the masters of the Fraternity play back the voxorders, and tease out the future truths – or lies – that they have been told.

The tower, as they approached it, was far larger than they had first imagined. The main structure, splintered and ruined, rose a full half kilometre into the dark, bruised sky, like an accusing finger. At the base, like the bole of an ancient tree, it thickened, and spread into great piers and buttresses that anchored it into the headland. Crumbling stone bridge spans linked the rocky shelf to the nearest piers.

There was no way of defining its origin or age, nor the hands – human or otherwise – that had constructed it. Even its purpose was in doubt. According to the scans, it was the only artificial structure on Malinter. Older star maps referred to it simply by means of a symbol that indicated ruin (antique/xenos).

As they picked their way through ancient screes of rubble and broken masonry towards the nearest span, the rain began to lash down, pattering on the mud and driving off the raised stonework. The rising wind began to shiver the glossy black ivy and climbing vines clinging in thick mats to the lower walls.

‘This message. It told you to come here?’ Nayl asked.

+What message?+

Nayl frowned and looked at the floating chair. ‘The message you got.’

+I never said anything about a message.+

‘Oh, come on! Fair play!’ Nayl growled. ‘Why won’t you tell us what we’re getting into here?’

+Harlon.+ Ravenor’s voice sliced into Nayl’s mind, and he winced slightly. Ravenor’s telepathy was sometimes painfully sharp when he was troubled or preoccupied. Nayl realised that Ravenor’s thought-voice was directed at him alone, a private word the others couldn’t hear.

+Trust me, old friend. I dare tell you nothing until I’m sure of what we’re dealing with. If it turns out to be a trick, you could be biased by misinformation.+

‘I’m no amateur,’ Nayl countered. The others looked at him, hearing only his side of the conversation.

+I know, but you’re a loyal man. Loyalty sometimes blinds us. Trust me on this.+

‘What in the name of the Golden Throne was that?’ Thonius said abruptly. They’d all heard it. Ravenor and Kys had felt it.

High in the ruined summit of the tower, something had screamed. Loud, hideous, inhuman, drawn out. More screams, from other non-human voices,

answered it. Each resounded both acoustically and psychically. The air temperature dropped sharply. Sheens of ice crackled into view, caking the upper sweep of the walls.

They moved on a few metres. The keening wails grew louder, whooping and circling within the high walls, as if screaming avian things were flying around inside. As lightning accompanies thunder, so each scream was accompanied by a sympathetic flash of light. The psychic shrieks seemed to draw the storm down, until a halo of flashing, jagged light coruscated in the sky above the tower. Corposant danced along the walls like white, fluorescent balls.

Kys, her psi-sensitive mind feeling it worse than the rest, paused to wipe fresh blood off her lip with the back of her gwel-skin glove. Her nose was bleeding.

As she did so, the hostiles began trying to kill them again.

The Divine Fraternity, may the ordos condemn their sick souls, seek to chart the future. All possible futures, in fact. With their mirrors and their abominably practised eyes, they identify events to come, and take special interest in those events that are ill-favoured. Disasters, plagues, invasions, collapses of governments, heresies, famines, defeats in battle. Doom, in any guise.

The masters of the Fraternity then disseminate the details of their oracles to the lower orders of their cult. By my estimation, the Fraternity numbers several thousand, many of them apparently upstanding Imperial citizens, spread through hundreds of worlds in the subsectors Antimar, Helican, Angelus and Ophidian. Once a 'prospect' as they call them has been identified, certain portions of the 'cult membership' are charged with doing everything they can to ensure that it comes to pass, preferably in the worst and most damaging way possible. If a plague is foreseen, then cult members will deliberately break quarantine orders to ensure that the outbreak spreads. If the prospect is a famine, they will plant incendiary bombs or bio-toxins in the Munitorum grain stores of the threatened world. A heretic emerges? They will protect him and publish his foul lies abroad. An invasion approaches? They are the fifth column that will destroy the defenders from within.

They seek doom. They seek to undermine the fabric of our Imperium, the culture of man, and cause it to founder and fall. They seek galactic

apocalypse, an age of darkness and fire, wherein their unholy masters, the Ruinous Powers, can rise up and take governance of all.

Five times now I have thwarted their efforts. They hate me, and wish me dead. Now I seek to derail their efforts a sixth time, here, tonight, on Malinter. I have journeyed far out of my way, pursued by their murder-bands, to carry a warning.

For I have seen their latest prospect with my own eyes. And it is a terrible thing.

Laser fire scorched across the mossy span of the bridge arch, sizzling in the rain. Some of it came from the ruin ahead, some from the crags behind them. Stonework shattered and split. Las-bolts and hard-rounds snapped and stung away from the age-polished cobbles.

‘Go!’ yelled Nayl, turning back towards the crags and firing his weapon in a two-handed brace. At his side, Kara Swole kicked her assault weapon into life. It bucked like a living thing, spitting spent casings out in a sideways flurry.

They backed across the bridge as the others ran ahead. Mathuin and Kys led the way, into the gunfire coming out of the dim archways and terraces ahead. Mathuin’s rotator cannon squealed, and flames danced around the spinning barrels. Stone debris and shorn ivy fluttered off the wounded walls. Kys saw a man, almost severed at the waist, drop from an archway into the lightless gulf below the bridge.

Ravenor and Thonius came up behind them. Thonius was still gazing up at the screamlight tearing and dancing around the tower overhead. He had one hand raised, as if to protect his face from the bullets and laser fire whipping around him.

+Concentrate!+

‘Yes, yes... of course...’ Thonius replied.

Mathuin ran under the first arch into the gloom of the tower chambers. His augmetic eyes, little coals of red hard-light, gleaming inside his lids, immediately adjusted to the light conditions, and revealed to him the things hidden in the shadows. He pivoted left, and mowed down four hostiles with a sustained belch of cannon fire. More shot at him.

Kys ran in beside him. She had a laspistol harnessed at her waist, but she hadn’t drawn it. She extended the heels of her palms, and four kineblades slipped out of the sheaths built into the forearms of her shirt. Each was thin, razor-sharp, twelve centimetres long, and lacked handles. She controlled

them with her mind, orbiting them around her body in wide, buzzing circuits, in a figure of eight, like some lethal human orrery.

A hostile opened fire directly at her with an autopistol, cracking off four shots. Without flinching, she faced them, circling a pair of the blades so they intercepted and deflected the first two shots. The second two she bent wide with her mind, so that they sailed off harmlessly like swatted flies.

Before he could fire again, Kys pinned the hostile to the stone wall with the third kineblade.

Mathuin was firing again.

‘You all right there, Kys?’ he yelled over the cannon’s roar.

‘Fine.’ She smiled. She was in her element. Dealing death in the name of the Emperor, punishing His enemies, was all she lived for. She was a secretive being. Patience Kys was not her real name, and none of the band knew what she’d been baptised. She’d been born on Sameter, in the Helican sub, and had grown to womanhood on that filthy, brow-beaten world. Things had happened to her there, things that had changed her and made her Patience Kys, the telekine killer. She never spoke of it. The simple fact was she had faced and beaten a miserable death, and now she was paying death back, in the God-Emperor’s name, with souls more deserving of annihilation.

With a jerk of her mind, she tugged the kineblade out of the pinned corpse and flew it back to join the others. They whistled as they spun, deflecting more gunfire away from her. Five more hostiles lay ahead, concealed behind mouldering pillars. With a nasal grunt, she sped the kineblades away from her. They shot like guided missiles down the terraceway, arcing around obstacles, whipping around the pillars. Four of the hostiles fell, slashed open by the hurtling blades.

The fifth she yanked out of cover with her telekinesis, and shot. Now, at last, the gun was in her hands.

Inexorable as a planet moving along its given path, Ravenor floated into the gloom, passing between Kys and Mathuin as the ex-bounty hunter hosed further mayhem at the last of the hostiles on his side. Thonius ran up alongside him.

‘What now?’ the interrogator asked hopefully. ‘At least we’re out of that ghastly rain.’

Screamlight echoed and flashed through the tower from far above, reverberating the structure to its core. Kys shuddered involuntarily. Her

nose was bleeding again.

+Carl? Zeph?+

Ravenor's mind-voice was quiet, as if he too was suffering the side effects of the psychic screams. +Rearguard, please. Make sure Kara and Harlon make it in alive.+

'But-' Thonius complained. Mathuin was already running back to the archway.

+Do as I say, Carl!+

'Yes, inquisitor,' replied Thonius. He turned and hurried after Mathuin.

+With me, please, Patience.+

Kys had just retrieved her kineblades. She held out her arms to let them slide back into her cuff-sheaths. The concentrated activity had drained her telekinetic strength, and the terrible screamlight from above had sapped her badly.

+Are you up to this?+

Kys raised her laspistol.

'I was born up for this, Gideon,' she grinned.

The prospect is, as most are, vague. There are no specifics. However, it is regarded as a one hundred per cent certainty by the masters of the Fraternity that a daemonic abomination is about to be manifested into the material universe. This, they predict, will come to pass between the years 400 and 403.M41. Emperor protect us, it may have already happened.

There are some details. The crucial event that triggers the manifestation will happen on Eustis Majoris, the overcrowded and dirty capital world of the Angelus subsector, within those aforementioned dates. It may, at the time, seem a minor event, but its consequences will be vast. Hundreds may die. Thousands... mayhap millions, if it is not stopped.

The daemon will take human form, and walk the worlds of the Imperium undetected. It has a name. Phonetically 'SLIITE' or perhaps Slyte or Slight.

It must be stopped. Its birth must be prevented.

All I have done in my long career in service of the ordos, all I have achieved... will be as nothing if this daemon comes into being.

'It's getting a little uncomfortable out here,' Nayl remarked. A las-shot had just scored across the flesh of his upper arm, but he didn't even wince.

'Agreed,' said Kara, ejecting another spent clip onto the cobbles of the span, and slamming in a fresh one.

They'd been backing away steadily under fire, and now the archway was tantalisingly close.

They ducked their heads instinctively as heavy fire ripped out of the archway behind them, and peppered the landwards-end of the bridge span. Mathuin was covering them at last.

They turned, and ran into cover, bullets and las-fire chasing their heels.

Inside the archway, Thonius was waving them on. Mathuin's cannon ground dry, and he paused to pop out the ammo drum and slap in a fresh one from the heavy pouches around his waist.

Nayl bent in the shadows, and reloaded his pistol quickly, expertly. He looked up, and stared out into the torrential rain. In the dark of the storm and the swiftly falling night, he counted at least nine muzzle flashes barking their way.

'How many?' he asked.

This time, Mathuin didn't answer. He turned his stony, hard-light gaze towards Kara and raised an eyebrow.

'Fifteen,' she said at once.

'Fifteen,' mused Nayl. 'That's five each.'

'Hey!' said Thonius. 'There are four of us here!'

'I know,' Nayl grinned. 'But it's still five each. Unless you intend to surprise us.'

'You little bastard,' snapped Thonius. He raised his weapon, and pinked off several shots at the enemy across the span.

'Hmmm...' said Nayl. 'Still fifteen.'

+Kara. Can you join us?+

'On my way, boss,' said Kara Swole. She grinned at Nayl. 'Can you deal here? I mean, now it's seven and a half each.'

'Get on,' Nayl said. He started firing. Kara dashed off into the darkness behind them.

Thonius blasted away again. They all saw a hostile on the far side of bridge, through the rain, tumble and pitch off the crag.

'There!' Thonius said triumphantly.

'Seven each then,' Mathuin remarked to Nayl.

The Divine Fraternity, as I have learned, find it particularly easy to identify in their prospects others who have dabbled in farseeing and clairvoyance. It is as if such individuals somehow illuminate their life courses by toying with the future. The bright track of one has attracted their particular attention. It

is through him, and the men and women around him, that the prospect of the manifestation has come to light.

He will cause it. Him, or one of those close to him.

That is why I have taken it upon myself to warn him.

For he is my friend. My pupil. My interrogator.

Kys hadn't seen or even sensed the cultists behind the next archway. Ravenor, gliding forwards without hesitation, pulped all four of them with his chair's built-in psycannons.

Kys followed him, striding through lakes of leaking blood and mashed tissue. She was worn out. The constant screams were getting to her.

They heard footfalls behind them. Kara Swole ran into view. Kys lowered her weapon.

'You called for me?'

+Indeed I did, Kara. I can't get up there.+

Kara looked up into the gloomy rafters and beams above them.

'No problem.' She took off her coat. Beneath it, she was dressed in a simple matt-green bodyglove.

'Hey, Kar. Luck,' called Kys.

Kara smiled.

She limbered up for a moment, and then leapt up into the rafters, gripping the mouldering wood, and gaining momentum.

Rapidly, all her acrobat skills coming back to her, she ascended, hand over hand, leaping from beam to beam, defying the dreadful gulf beneath her.

She was getting increasingly close to the flitting source of the screamlight. Her pulse raced. Grunting, she somersaulted again, and landed on her feet on a crossmember.

Kara stood for a moment, feeling the streaming rain slick down over her from the tower's exposed roof. She stuck out her hands for balance, the assault weapon tightly cinched under her bosom.

There was a light above her, shining out from a stairless doorway in the shell of the tower. Faint artificial light, illuminating the millions of raindrops as they hurtled down the empty tower shaft towards her.

'Seeing this?' she asked.

+Yes, Kara.+

'What you expected?'

+I have no idea.+

‘Here goes,’ she said, and jumped into space, into rainfall, into air. A hesitation, on the brink, dark depths below her. Then she seized a rotting timber beam, and swung, her fingers biting deep into the damp, flaking wood.

She pivoted in the air, and flew up into the doorway, feet first.

She landed firmly, balanced, arms wide.

A figure stood before her in the ruined tower room, illuminated by a single hovering glow-globe.

‘Hello, Kara,’ the figure said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

She gasped. ‘Oh God-Emperor... my master...’

The man was tall, shrouded in a dark leather coat that did not quite conceal the crude augmetics supporting his frame. His head was bald, his eyes dark-rimmed. He leaned heavily on a metal staff.

Rainwater streaming off him, Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn gazed at her.

Down at the archway, Thonius recoiled in horror.

‘I think we have a problem,’ he said.

‘Don’t be such a pussy,’ Nayl said.

‘Actually, I think he might be right,’ said Mathuin. ‘That’s not good, is it?’

Nayl craned his neck to look. Something blocky and heavy was striding towards them over the bridge span. It was metal and solid, machined striding limbs hissing steam from piston bearings. Its arms were folded against the sides of its torso like the wings of a flightless bird. Those arms, each one a heavy lascannon, began to cough and spit. Massive hydraulic absorbers soaked up the recoil.

The archway collapsed in a shower of exploding masonry. Nayl, Thonius and Mathuin fled into the cover of the gallery behind.

‘Emperor save me,’ Nayl exclaimed. ‘They’ve got a bloody Dreadnought!’

Rainwater dripped off Eisenhorn’s nose.

‘Gideon? Is he with you, Kara?’ he asked.

‘Yes, he is,’ she stammered. ‘Throne, it’s good to see you.’

‘And you, my dear. But it’s important I speak to Gideon.’

Kara nodded.

‘Ware me,’ she said.

Far below, Ravenor heard her. Kara Swole stiffened, her eyes clouding. The wraithbone pendant at her throat glowed with a dull, ethereal light.

She wasn't Kara Swole any more. Her body was possessed by the mind of Gideon Ravenor.

'Hello, Gregor,' Kara's mouth said.

'Gideon. Well met. I was worried you wouldn't come.'

'And ignore a summons from my mentor? Phrased in Glossia? "Thorn wishes Talon..." I was hardly going to ignore that.'

'I thought you would appreciate a taste of the old, private code,' said Eisenhorn. His frozen face failed to show the smile he was feeling.

'How could I forget it, Thorn? You drummed it into me.'

Eisenhorn nodded. 'Much effort getting here?'

Kara's lips conveyed Ravenor's words. 'Some. An effort made to kill us. Nayl is holding them off at the gateway to the tower.'

'Old Harlon, eh?' Eisenhorn said. 'Ever dependable. You've got a good man there, Gideon. A fine man. Give him my respects. And Kara too, best there is.'

'I know, Gregor.' A strangely intense expression that wasn't her own appeared on Kara's face. 'I think it's time you told me why you brought me here.'

'Yes, it is. But in person, I think. That would be best. That way you can stop subjecting Kara to that effort of puppeting. And we can be more private. I'll come down to you.'

'How? There are no stairs.'

'The same way I got up here,' Eisenhorn said. He looked upwards, into the rain hosing down through the broken roof.

'Cherubael?' he whispered.

Something nightmarish in the strobing screamlight answered him.

Its pitted steel hull glossy with rain, the Dreadnought strode through the shattered archway. The booming storm threw its hulking shadow a hundred jagging directions at once with its lightning. Its massive cannon pods pumped pneumatically as they retched out streams of las-bolts. The weapons made sharp, barking squeals as they discharged, a repeating note louder than the storm.

Behind it, three dozen armed brethren of the Divine Fraternity charged across the bridge span.

Stone split and fractured under the bombardment. Pillars that had stood for aeons teetered and collapsed like felled trees, spraying stone shards across the terrace flooring.

Nayl, Mathuin and Thonius retreated into the empty inner chambers of the ruined tower. Even Mathuin's rotator couldn't so much as dent the Dreadnought's armour casing.

'Someone really, really wants us dead,' Thonius said.

'Us... or the person we came here to meet,' Nayl countered. They hurried down a dim colonnade, and Nayl shoved both his comrades into the cover of a side arcade as cannon fire – bright as sunbursts – sizzled down the chamber.

'Golden Throne! There's got to be something we can try!' Nayl said.

Mathuin reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out three close-focus frag grenades. He held them like a market-seller would hold apples or ploins. It was just like Mathuin to bring a pocket full of explosives. He never felt properly dressed unless he was armed to the back teeth.

'Don't suppose you've got a mini-nuke in the other pocket?' asked Thonius.

'My other suit's at the cleaners,' Mathuin replied.

'They'll have to do,' said Nayl. 'We'll go with what we've got.' He looked around. They could hear the heavy clanking footfalls of the Dreadnought bearing down on them, the hiss of its hydraulic pistons, the whirr of its motivators.

'They may not even crack the thing's plating,' Mathuin remarked. As well as a supply of ridiculous ordnance, Zeph Mathuin could always be relied on for copious pessimism.

'We'll have to get them close,' said Thonius.

'We?' said Nayl. He'd already taken one of the grenades, and was weighing it up like a ball.

'Yes, Mr Nayl. We.' Thonius took another of the grenades, holding it between finger and thumb as if it were a potentially venomous insect. He really wasn't comfortable with the physicality of fighting. Thonius could hack cogitators and archive stacks faster than any of them, and could rewrite codes that any of the rest didn't even understand. He was Ravenor's interrogator because of his considerable intellect, not his killing talents. That's why Ravenor employed the likes of Nayl and Mathuin.

‘Three of us, three bombs,’ Thonius stated. ‘We’re all in this together. I’m not going to be pulped by that thing without having a go at stopping it myself.’

Nayl looked dubiously at Mathuin.

‘It’s not up for debate, you vulgarians,’ Thonius said snottily. ‘Don’t make me remind you I’m technically in charge here.’

‘Oh, that would explain why we’re technically nose deep in crap,’ Nayl said.

A thick section of stone wall blew in nearby, hammered to fragments by withering cannon fire. The massive weight of the Dreadnought crushed heat-brittled stone to dust as it stomped through the gap.

The trio began to run again, down the next terrace, trying to put some distance between them and the killing machine.

‘Get ahead!’ Mathuin said. ‘I’ll take the first pop.’ Nayl nodded and grabbed hold of Thonius, who was still puzzling over his grenade, figuring out how to adjust the knurled dial to set the timer. Nayl got the interrogator into cover.

Thonius straightened his sleeves.

‘If you’ve pulled my coat out of shape, Nayl...’ he began.

Nayl glared at him.

Behind them, in the open, Mathuin primed his grenade, and turned. As the Dreadnought hove into view, he hurled the small, black charge.

Kara rejoined Ravenor and Kys like an ape, swinging down through the rafters, and leaping the last few metres.

Eisenhorn descended after her. He was being carried by a grotesque figure, a human shape twisted and distended by arcane forces. The thing glowed with an eldritch inner light. Its bare limbs and torso were covered with runes and sigils. Chains dragged from its ankles.

It set Eisenhorn’s heavy, cumbersome form down on the flagstones.

‘Thank you, Cherubael,’ he said.

The thing, its head lolling brokenly, exposed its teeth in a dreadful smile. ‘That’s all? I can go back now?’ it said. Its voice was like sandpaper on glass. ‘There are many more phantoms up there to burn.’

‘Go ahead,’ Eisenhorn said.

The dreadful daemonhost zoomed back aloft into the rain-swept heights of the ruin. At once, the ghastly screaming began again. Light pulsed and flashed.

Eisenhorn faced Ravenor's chair. 'The Fraternity has unleashed everything they have tonight to stop me. To stop me talking to you. Daemonhosts of their own. Cherubael has been battling them. I think he's enjoying it.'

'He?' said Ravenor via his chair's voxponder. 'Last we met, you called that thing "it", my master.'

Eisenhorn shrugged. His augmetics sighed with the gesture. 'We have reached an understanding. Does that shock you, Gideon?'

'Nothing shocks me any more,' said Ravenor.

'Good,' said Eisenhorn. He looked at Kara and Kys.

'We need a moment, Kara. If you and your friend wouldn't mind.'

'Patience Kys,' Kys said, stern and hard.

'I know who you are,' said Eisenhorn, and turned away with Ravenor. In a low voice, he began to tell his ex-pupil all he knew about the Divine Fraternity.

'Kar... that's Eisenhorn?' Kys whispered to Kara as they watched the figures withdraw.

'Yes,' replied Kara. She was still rather stunned by the meeting, and Ravenor's brief waring had left her tired.

'Everything you and Harlon have said about him... I expected...'

'What?'

'Something more intimidating. He's just a broken old man. And I can't think why he consorts with a Chaos-filth thing like that host-form.'

Kara shrugged. 'I don't know about the daemonhost. He fought it and hated it for so long, and then... I dunno. Maybe he's become the radical they say. But you're wrong about him being a broken old man. Well, he's broken and he's old... but I'd rather go up against Ravenor unarmed than ever cross Gregor Eisenhorn.'

Mathuin's grenade exploded. The aim had been good, but the device had bounced oddly at the last moment, and had gone off beneath the striding Dreadnought. The machine paced on through the ball of fire, untroubled.

Mathuin dived for cover as the cannons began pumping again.

'Crap... My turn, I suppose,' said Nayl. He clicked the setter to four seconds, thumbed the igniter, and ran into the hallway, bowling the grenade underarm.

Then he threw himself into shelter.

The grenade bounced once, lifted with the spin Nayl had put on it, and smacked bluntly against the front shell of the Dreadnought.

It was just rebounding when it detonated.

The Dreadnought vanished in a sheet of flame that boiled down the hallway, compressed and driven by the walls and roof.

As it cleared, Thonius saw the Dreadnought. Its front was scorched, but it was far, far from dead.

‘Damn. Just me then,’ he said.

‘You’ve dabbled in farseeing,’ Eisenhorn said. ‘I know that. Your time spent with the eldar drew you in that direction.’

‘I won’t deny it,’ Ravenor replied.

‘That makes you bright to the Fraternity,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘It illuminates you in the interwoven pathways of the future. That’s why they located you in their prospects.’

Ravenor was quiet for a moment. ‘And you’ve come all this way, risked all this danger... to warn me?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’m flattered.’

‘Don’t be, Gideon. You’d do the same for me.’

‘I’m sure I would. But what you’re telling me is... crazy.’

Eisenhorn bowed his head, and ran the fingers of his right hand up and down the cold grip of his runestaff.

‘Of course it sounds crazy,’ he said. ‘But it’s true. I ask you this... if you don’t believe me, why are these cultist fools trying so hard to prevent our meeting here tonight? They know it’s true. They want you denied of this warning.’

‘That I will trigger this manifestation? This daemon-birth?’

‘You, or one close to you. The trigger point is something that happens on Eustis Majoris.’

Within his force chair, Ravenor was numb. ‘I won’t lie, Gregor. My current investigations focus on that world. I was en route to Eustis Majoris when I diverted to meet you here. But I have no knowledge of this Slight. It hasn’t figured in any of my research. I can’t believe that something I will do... or something one of my band will do... will—’

‘Gideon, I can’t believe my only ally these days is a daemonhost. Fate surprises us all.’

‘So what should I do, now you’ve warned me? Abandon my investigations on Eustis? Shy away from that world in the hope that by avoiding it I can also avoid this prophecy?’

Eisenhorn's face was in shadow. 'Maybe you should.'

'No,' said Ravenor. 'What I should be is careful. Careful in my own actions, careful to oversee the actions of my team. If there is truth in the Fraternity's prophecy, it is surely bound up in the dire conspiracy I am just now uncovering on Eustis Majoris. But I must prosecute that case. I would be failing in the duty you charged me with if I didn't. After all, the future is not set. We make it, don't we?'

'I think we do. I hope we do.'

'Gregor, when have either of us shirked from serving the Throne just because we're afraid things might go bad? We are inquisitors, we seek. We do not hide.'

Eisenhorn raised his head, and let the falling rain drops patter off his upraised palm. 'Gideon, I came to warn you, nothing else. I never expected you to change your course. Now, at least, you're aware of a "might be". You can be ready for it. That's all I wanted.'

Far behind them, the sound of rapid cannon-fire and dull explosions echoed through the tower.

'I think the time for conversation is over,' said Eisenhorn.

Thonius' pockets were not full of munitions and ordnance like Mathuin's, but he reached into them anyway. In one, a mini-cogitator, in another, two data-slates. In a third, a clasped leather case in which he had wrapped his tools: files, data-pins, fine brushes, tubes of lubricant, a vial of adhesive, pliers and tweezers. All the bric-a-brac that aided him in conquering and tinkering with cogitators and codifiers.

'Carl! Get into cover!' Nayl was yelling.

Thonius slid out the vial of adhesive, and wiped the drooling nozzle down the side of the grenade ball, waiting a moment for it to get contact-tacky.

Then, taking a deep breath, he leapt out of cover into the face of the Dreadnought, and lobbed the grenade. It hit the front casing, and adhered there, stuck fast.

Mathuin threw himself out of cover, and tackled Thonius, bringing him down behind a pillar.

The grenade exploded.

'You see?' said Thonius. 'You see how *thinking* works?'

But the Dreadnought wasn't finished. The blast had split its belly plates, but it was still moving, still striding, still firing.

Thonius shrugged. 'All right... we're dead.'

The Dreadnought suddenly stopped blasting. It faltered. A chill swept over the chamber.

Ravenor's chair slid into view, heading towards the killer machine. With the force of his mind, he had momentarily jammed its weapons.

Sudden frost coated the walls, Ravenor's chair and the Dreadnought. The machine tried to move. Cycling mechanisms shuddered as it attempted to clear its guns.

A tall figure strode past Ravenor, heading for the Dreadnought. It held a runestaff in one hand and a drawn sword in the other. Its robes fluttered out behind it, stiff with ice.

'Holy Terra!' exclaimed Nayl. 'Eisenhorn?'

A second before Ravenor's mental grip failed, a second before the cannons resumed their murderous work, Eisenhorn swung the sword – Barbarisater – and cleft the Dreadnought in two. The sword-blade ripped along the fissure Thonius' cunning grenade had put in it.

Eisenhorn turned aside, and shielded his face as the Dreadnought combusted.

He looked back at them all, terrible and majestic, backlit by flames.

'Shall we?' he said.

With their Dreadnought gone, the remainder of the Fraternity force fled. The warband and the two inquisitors slaughtered many as they made their escape into the storm.

Tugging one of her kineblades out of a body with her mind, Kys watched Eisenhorn ripping his way through the faltering hostiles around them.

'Now I see what you mean,' she said to Kara Swole.

'I'm done here,' Gregor Eisenhorn said. He looked back across the bridge span to the tower. Screamlight was still dancing around the summit. 'Cherubael needs my help now. I should go and see how he's doing.'

'I will be vigilant,' Ravenor said.

Eisenhorn knelt, and pressed his gnarled hands flat against the side of the chair.

'The Emperor go with you. I've said my piece. It's up to you now, Gideon.'

Eisenhorn rose and looked at the others. 'Mamzel Kys. Interrogator. Mr Mathuin. A pleasure meeting you.' He nodded to each of them. 'Kara?'

She smiled. 'Gregor.'

'Never a hardship seeing you. Look after Gideon for me.'

'I will.'

Eisenhorn looked at Harlon Nayl, and held out a hand. Nayl clasped it with both of his.

'Harlon. Like old times.'

'Emperor protect you, Gregor.'

'I hope so,' Eisenhorn said, and walked away, back across the bridge span towards the tower where the screamlight still flashed and sparked. They knew they would not see him again.

Unless the future was not as set as it seemed.

Malinter fell away below them, vast and silent. Nayl piloted the transport into low orbit, flashing out signals to their ship.

Once the nav was set and automatics had taken over, he turned his chair on its pivot, and looked at Ravenor.

'He wasn't the same,' he said.

+How do you mean?+

'He seemed so sane. I thought he was mad.'

+Yes. I thought that too. It's hard to know whether I should believe him.+

'About what?'

+About the dangers ahead, Harlon. The risks we may take.+

'So... what do we do?'

+We carry on. We do our best. We serve the Emperor of Mankind. If what Gregor said comes to pass, we deal with it. Unless you have a better idea.'

'Not a one,' replied Nayl, turning back to study the controls.

+Good,+ sent Ravenor, and wheeled his chair around, returning to the cabin space behind where the others were gathered.

Nayl sighed, and looked ahead at the turning starfields.

The future lay ahead, its back to them, saying nothing.

GARDENS OF TYCHO

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The nature of Master Dellac's line of business had never come up in conversation, and Valentin Drusher was in no position to ask impertinent questions. Certainly, Master Dellac was a successful man, one of the most conspicuously wealthy citizens on that dusty stretch of the Bone Coast. Drusher had an idea or two, but decided it was probably safer not to know. He just did what he was told. Two visits a week, after hours, to Master Dellac's mansion up in the hills, providing his specialist services on a private basis, in return for an agreed wage. And no questions asked, either way.

Sometimes, Master Dellac would supplement Drusher's payment with a gift: a smoked ham, a packet of expensive, dainty biscuits, perhaps even a bottle of imported wine. Drusher knew he could get good prices selling these items on later, but he always kept them for himself. It wasn't that he was greedy, or some kind of epicure (although, Throne knows, it had been a long, long time since Valentin Drusher had known any luxury in his life). It was simply because there was a line Drusher wasn't prepared to cross. So many aspects of his life, his respectability, and his good character, had been eroded over the years, he held on tight to those he still had.

Besides, he was a meek man, and he was too afraid of getting caught.

Late one Lauday evening, Drusher was making the return journey from Dellac's house to Kaloster. Drusher went to and from the mansion on foot, a solid journey of an hour each way. Dellac never offered him transport, even though he had a driver. Drusher tried to consider the biweekly trips the sort of decent exercise a man of his age ought to be getting, but by the time he returned to his habitat on Amon Street, he was always weary.

The sun had gone, leaving the sky over the small coastal town stained like pink marble. A night wind was picking up, sifting white dust from the dunes across the town road, and Kaloster itself seemed shuttered and dark.

There was no nightlife, no remission from the frugal, small-town quiet. But in addition to the payment in his coat pocket, Drusher carried a piece of good brisket in his satchel. He would eat well for the next few nights at least.

Amon Street was a tenement slope running down from Aquila Square to the rusty wharfs and the condemned fishworks. The buildings were drab brown with age and neglect, and their roofs were in need of repair. The air in the street stank because of the lime burners just across the way. Drusher rented rooms on the fourth floor of number seventy.

A large black transporter with big chrome headlamps was parked just down the street. Drusher noticed it as he was fumbling for his key, but paid it little heed. He went up the narrow wooden staircase to his door.

It was only when he stepped into his little room, he realised someone was already there.

The man was robust and rather ugly. Heavy-browed with a shock of thick, dark hair and a shapeless, asymmetric face, he wore a thick, high-buttoned suit of black serge and a heavy leather stormcoat, also black. He was seated, casually, on the wooden pole-back chair behind the door, waiting.

‘What are you—’ Drusher began, his voice coming out thin and reedy.

‘You Drusher?’ the man asked.

‘Yes. Why? What are you doing here? This is my—’

‘Valentin Drusher?’ the man pressed, glancing at a small data-slate in his left hand. ‘Magos biologis? Says here you’re forty-seven. Is that right? You look older.’

‘I am Valentin Drusher,’ Drusher replied, too scared to be offended. ‘What is this about? Who are you?’

‘Sit down, magos. Over there, please. Put your satchel on the table.’

Drusher did as he was told. His pulse was thumping, and his skin had become clammy. He had an awful feeling he knew what this was about.

‘I’m Falken,’ the man said, and briefly flashed an identity warrant at him. Drusher swallowed as he glimpsed the silver seal of the Magistratum, attached to which was a small orange ribbon that denoted the Martial Order Division. ‘How long have you been here on Gershom?’

‘Ah, fourteen years. Fourteen years this winter.’

‘And here in Kaloster?’

‘Just eighteen months.’

The man looked at his data-slate again. 'According to Central Records, you are employed by the Administratum to teach Natural History at the local scholam.'

'That's correct. My papers are in order.'

'But you're a magos biologis, not a teacher.'

'Employment prospects on this world are not great for a man of my calling. I take what work I can. The teaching stipend offered by the Administratum keeps a roof over my head.'

The man pursed his lips. 'If the employment prospects for your kind are thin on the ground, magos, it begs the question why you came to Gershom in the first place. Let alone why you chose to stay here for fourteen years.'

Despite his fear, Drusher felt piqued. This was the old injustice again, back to haunt him. 'When I came to this world, sir, I was gainfully employed. The Lord Governor himself was my patron. He commissioned me to produce a complete taxonomy of the planet's fauna. The work took seven years, but at the end of it, complications arose...'

'Complications?'

'A legal matter. I was forced to stay on for another two years, as a witness. All the money I had earned from the commission ran out. By the time the case was settled, I could no longer afford passage to another world. I have been here ever since, making a living as best I can.'

The man, Falken, didn't seem very interested. In Drusher's experience, no one ever was. On a downtrodden outworld like Gershom, everyone had their own sob story.

'You keep glancing at your satchel, magos,' Falken remarked suddenly. 'Why is that?'

Drusher swallowed hard again. He had never been any good at lying.

'Sir,' he said quietly, 'could you tell me... I mean, would things go better for me if I made a full confession now?'

Falken blinked, as if surprised, then smiled.

'That's a good idea,' he said, sitting down to face Drusher across the low table where the satchel sat. 'Why don't you do just that?'

'I'm not proud of this,' said Drusher. 'I mean, it was stupid. I knew the Magistratum would find out eventually. It's just... things have been so tight.'

'Go on.'

‘The Administratum pays me a stipend for my services, along with certain ration benefits as per the Martial Order. This is of course contingent on me not... on me not supplementing my earnings.’

Naturally,’ nodded Falken. ‘If you break the terms, there is a penalty. It can be severe.’

Drusher sighed, and showed Falken the contents of his satchel. ‘There is a man, a local businessman, who employs me, two evenings a week. It is a private arrangement. He pays me in cash, no questions asked.’

‘How much?’

‘Two crowns per evening. He has a daughter. For her, he retains my services...’

Falken looked at the things Drusher was showing him.

‘You do this with his daughter?’

‘Yes. Sometimes he watches.’

Falken got up. ‘I see. This is a pretty picture, isn’t it?’ For some reason, Falken seemed to be stifling a smile, as if something amused him terribly.

‘Am I in serious trouble?’ Drusher asked.

‘You’ll have to come with me,’ Falken said. ‘To Tycho.’

‘To Tycho?’

‘The Marshal wants to speak with you.’

‘Oh Throne!’ Drusher gasped. ‘I thought perhaps a fine...’

‘Pack your things, magos. All of them. I’ll give you five minutes.’

Drusher had very few belongings. They fitted into two small bags. Falken didn’t offer to carry either of them down to the transporter.

It was dark now, fully night. When the transporter’s engine turned over, the glare of the headlights filled the depths of Amon Street.

Drusher sat up front, beside the Magistratum officer. They drove up through the town, onto the coast highway, and turned south.

The cities of the Southern Peninsula, Tycho amongst them, had been the arena of a savage civil war that had raged for over ten years. The popular separatist movement had finally been defeated by government forces two years earlier, but by then the war had critically weakened Gershom’s already-ailing economy. Strict, Imperial martial order had been imposed throughout the Peninsula and right up through the Bone Coast into the Eastern Provinces.

The civil war had stained the air with smoke, and poisoned the coastal waters, killing off the fishing industry. The cities of the Peninsula were

urban ruins where the Martial Order Division worked to re-establish Imperium law and support the impoverished civilian population.

Falken drove for two hours without speaking. The vox-set under his dashboard, turned down, crackled with Magistratum traffic as if it were talking in its sleep. Drusher stared out of the window at the darkness and the occasional black ruin that loomed out of it. This was it, he felt. Gershom was his nemesis. It had lured him in, a bright young man with an equally bright future before him, and it had trapped him like a fettle fly in amber. It had drained him dry, throttled his spirit, made him destitute.

And now this, after all his efforts to earn a crust to live, let alone a ticket off-world, it was going to destroy him. Disgrace. Shame. Perhaps a custodial sentence.

‘I don’t deserve this,’ he murmured.

‘What’s that?’ asked Falken at the wheel.

‘Nothing.’

They began to pass through armoured roadblocks where Magistratum troopers wearing the orange ribbon of the Martial Order Division waved Falken through. They were entering the Peninsula proper, the real warzone. Ghost cities, tumbled and forlorn, drifted past, lit by searchlights and military beacons. The dark landscape outside the transporter became a phosphorescent waste of fragile walls and empty habs.

Tycho was the principal city of the Peninsula region, and when they drove in through its empty streets, four hours after leaving Kaloster, Drusher saw a miserable calamity of twisted girders, piled rubble and smoke-blackened buildings. His face, half-lit by the luminous dials of the dashboard, reflected back to him off the window, superimposed on the ruins. Pale, thin, bespectacled, the hair thin and grey. Drusher wasn’t sure if he resembled the wastes of Tycho, or if they resembled him.

They pulled up outside a mouldering ouslite monolith in the city centre.

‘Leave your bags,’ Falken said, getting out. ‘I’ll have them brought in.’

Drusher followed him in through the towering entrance. Magistratum officers hurried to and fro in the echoing atrium, and limp Imperial flags hung from the roof. There was a smell of counterseptic.

‘This way,’ Falken said.

He led Drusher to a room on the fifth floor. The elevators were out, and they had to use the stairs. Falken made him wait outside the heavy double doors.

The hallway was cold, and night air seeped in through the cracked windowpanes at the far end. Drusher paced up and down. He could hear the rattle and clack of cogitators in nearby rooms, and an occasional shout from down below. Then he heard laughter from behind the double doors.

Falken emerged. He was still chuckling.

‘You can go in now,’ he said.

Drusher walked in, the doors closing behind him. The office was large and grim, a single metal desk planted on a threadbare rug. Half a dozen wire-basket carts heavily laden with dog-eared dossiers and files. A cogitator, whirring to itself. Faded spaces on the walls where pictures had once hung.

‘Throne. I wouldn’t have recognised you, magos,’ said a voice.

She was standing by the deep windows, silhouetted against the night-time city outside. He knew the voice at once.

‘Macks?’

Germaine Macks stepped forwards to meet him, a smile on her lips. Her hair was still short, her face still lean, the old, tiny zigzag scar above the left-hand side of her mouth still visible. The other, newer scar on her forehead was half-hidden under her fringe.

‘Hello, Valentin,’ she said. ‘What’s it been now? Five years? More?’

He nodded. ‘Deputy Macks...’

She shook her head. ‘It’s Magistratum Marshal Macks now. Chief of Martial Order, Tycho city.’

He stiffened. ‘Mamzel, I can explain everything. I hope the fact that you know me of old might mitigate the—’

‘Falken was playing with you, magos.’

‘Excuse me, what?’

Macks sat down behind her desk. ‘I sent Falken up the coast to get you. Throne knows why you started confessing things to him. Guilty conscience, Valentin?’

‘I...’ Drusher stammered.

‘Falken was beside himself. He told me he didn’t think he could keep a straight face on the journey down here. Did you think you were in trouble?’

‘He... that is... I...’

‘Teaching the daughter of some small-time racketeer the art of watercolour painting? To supplement the pittance Admin pays you? Come

on, Valentin! I'd hardly spare a chief investigator to go all that way to bring you in. You criminal mastermind, you.'

Drusher felt a little giddy.

'May I sit down?' he asked.

She nodded, still chuckling, and reached into a desk drawer for a bottle of amasec and two shot glasses.

'Get this inside you, you filthy recidivist,' she grinned, handing one glass to him.

'I really don't understand what's going on...' Drusher said.

'Neither do I,' she said. 'That's why I want some help. Some expert help. I said you weren't in trouble, and I was lying. You're not in personal trouble, but there is trouble here. And I'm about to drop you right in it.'

'Oh,' he said.

'Drink up,' Macks said. 'You'll need it where we're going.'

'In your expert opinion,' she said, 'what did that?'

Drusher took a long, slow look, then excused himself. Coming up, the amasec was a lot hotter and more acid than it had felt going down.

'All right?' she said.

He wiped his mouth, and nodded reluctantly. Macks took a little pot out of her uniform pocket, and smeared what looked like grease under her nose. She reached out and did the same to Drusher. The fierce camphor smell of osscil filled his sinuses.

'Should have done that before I took you in,' Macks apologised. 'Old medicae mortus trick. It masks the stench of decay.'

She led him back into the morgue. The place was chilly, and tiled with mauve enamel squares. There were brass plugholes every few metres across the floor, and in the distance, Drusher could hear water pattering from a leaky scrub-hose. High-gain glow-strips, sharp and white, filled the chamber with a light like frost.

The cadaver lay on a steel gurney beside an autopsy unit. Other shapes, tagged and covered in red sheets, lurked nearby on other trolleys.

'All right to take another look?' Macks asked.

Drusher nodded.

She folded the red shroud back.

The man was naked, his body as white and swollen as cooked seafood. His hands, feet and genitals seemed shrivelled with cold, and the fingernails

stood proud and dark. The hairs on his chest and pubis were black and looked like insect legs.

He must have been about one-eighty in life, Drusher figured, fighting back another wave of nausea. Heavyset. Bruises of lividity marked his lumbar region, and there were other darker blue bruises around his ribs.

The front of his face, and most of his throat, had been bitten away. Parts of the skull structure had gone, along with the soft tissue. Cleanly severed, like industrial shears had...

Drusher gagged, and looked aside.

‘Animal, right?’ Macks said.

Drusher mumbled something.

‘Was that a yes?’

‘It would appear to be a bite,’ Drusher said, his voice very tiny. ‘Very deep and strong. And then... the suggestion of some feeding. Around the face and neck.’

‘Animal, right?’ she repeated.

‘I suppose. Nothing human could have... bitten like that.’

‘I measured the bite radius. Just like you taught me. Remember, in Outer Udar? I measured it.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Twenty centimetres. And I checked too. No tooth fragments. This was clean. I mean, it just bit his face right off.’

Drusher turned slowly. ‘Macks? What am I doing here?’

‘Helping my investigation,’ she said. ‘I thought we’d covered that. I’m in charge in this neck of the woods, with plenty enough problems to contend with, I can tell you... and then this crap happens. I look for an expert, and lo and behold I find Magos Biologis Valentin Drusher, my old pal, working as a teacher in Kaloster. So I thought, Macks, that’s perfect. We worked together so well before, and this clearly needs a biologis expert.’

‘That’s great...’

‘Valentin, cheer up. There’s money in this. I’ll bill your hours out to the Magistratum, and you’ll get three times what the Administratum was paying you. Expert witness and all.’

‘You’re running the Martial Order programme here in Tycho, and you pull strings like that to get me to consider one case?’

‘No,’ said Macks. ‘I should have explained that too, I guess. This isn’t the only victim.’

‘How many others?’ he asked.

Macks made a vague gesture that encompassed all the other gurneys in the chamber. Twenty-five, thirty, maybe more.

‘You’re joking?’

‘I wish I was. Something is chomping its way through the population.’

Drusher steeled himself, and turned back to the exposed corpse, switching his standard glasses for his reading pair. ‘A fluorescing lamp, please. And a close glass.’

She handed him the glass from the autopsy cart, and held the lamp up, bathing the dead man’s devastated skull with blue light.

Drusher picked up a steel probe, and gently excised the lip of one of the revealed bone edges. He fought to keep his gorge down.

‘No tooth fragments.’

‘I told you.’

‘I mean nothing,’ he said. ‘Not even the bacillus residue one would expect from the wound mark of a predator. This wasn’t an animal. It’s not a bite.’

‘What?’

‘It’s too clean. I’d say you were looking for a man with a chainsword.’

Macks shook her head. ‘No.’

‘Why no?’

‘Because if there was a maniac with a chainsword running around downtown Tycho, I’d know about it. This is animal, Valentin.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ he asked.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘I’ll show you.’

The headlamps of her transporter picked out the sign over the wrought-iron gateway.

The Gardens of Tycho.

‘Well-stocked before the civil war,’ she said, pulling on the wheel. ‘The biggest xenozoological exhibit on the planet. The local governor had a thing about exotic animals.’

‘And?’

‘And, Valentin, it was bombed during the war. Some animals were killed, but many more escaped. I think something from here is roaming the ruins of Tycho, hungry, neglected, killing people.’

‘And that’s why...’ he began.

‘That’s why I need a magos biologists,’ she finished.

They pulled up and got out. The gardens were dark and quiet. It was still two hours before dawn. There was an awful damp reek in the air, emanating from the empty cages and the dank rockcrete pens.

Macks had given Drusher a stablight, and carried one of her own. They walked together, their footsteps gritty and crisp on the ground, playing the beams around.

The Gardens of Tycho had not been a sophisticated collection. Drusher remembered the spectacular xeno-fauna halls of Thracian Primaris that he had visited as a young man. There, the pens and enclosures had been encoded to create perfect habitats for the precious specimens, often with their own atmospheres, their own gravities even.

Such expertise – and the money to realise it – had not been available on Tycho. These were simple cages and, in places, armoured holding tanks, where exotic creatures from the far-flung corners of the Imperium had lived out their days on Gershom in miserable confinement.

Drusher knew exactly how they felt.

‘If it’s been caged like this, Macks, it will perhaps have become psychotic,’ he said.

‘The animal?’

‘The animal. It’s common in poor conditions such as these. Animals held in crude cages often develop behavioural problems. They become unpredictable. Violent.’

‘But if it’s a predator anyway...’ she began.

‘Even predators have patterns. The need to hunt, to breed, to territorialise. Limit those things, and you break the pattern.’

‘That’s important why?’ she asked.

‘If this animal is a carnivore, and I would suspect as much, it isn’t feeding on its kills. Well, only minimally. It is killing simply to kill.’

‘Like the hill beast?’ she murmured, thinking back to that haunted winter in Outer Udar.

‘No,’ he said. ‘That beast was different. Killing was its behaviour. Here we have an aberration.’

As they walked further, Drusher began to see the awful damage done in the course of the war. Bomb-shattered pens, mounds of rubble, plasteel cages shorn from their mounting blocks.

And bones.

There were corpses in the intact pens too. Limp sacks of dried flesh, scattered vertebrae, the lingering stench of dung and decay. A row of wire domes that had once held rare birds was littered with bright feathers. Tufts of down caked the wire mesh, evidence of frantic, starving attempts to be free. They reminded Drusher of Baron Karne's poultry coops.

'We thought everything had died,' Macks said. 'The stink when we first came down here. I mean, nothing had been fed or cleaned out in months. Everything in a sealed cage was dead, except some kind of emaciated dromedary horse, which had been living off its own fat deposits, and even that died a few days after we freed it. And everything in the bombed cages we figured was wiped out, although there are some finch-monkeys loose in the Lower Bowery, freaking little things, and Falken swears he saw a grazer on Lemand Street one night, though I say he was drunk.'

'So if something's loose, it came from the bomb-damaged cages?' Drusher said.

She shrugged. 'Unless some well-intentioned citizen came along during the war, and let something out and then locked the cage again. Some of them seem to be empty, though the collection's manifest doesn't say if they were just unstocked pens. It's years out of date.'

'You have a manifest?'

Macks nodded and produced a data-slate from her coat. 'I've highlighted any item that was caged in the bombed area, and also anything connected to an empty cage. Throne, Valentin, I haven't the first clue what half of them are. So glad to have an expert on board.'

He started to look at the list. 'So it could be anything highlighted, or anything at all, given the fact that the stock might have been changed or rotated after this list was made?'

She was about to reply when her vox-link chimed. The sharp little note made Drusher jump. Macks took the call.

'We have to go,' she said, turning to head back to the exit. 'I've been called in. Some drunken idiots brawling in a tavern after curfew.'

'Do I have to come?' he said.

She turned back and shone her stablight in his face. 'No. Why, would you like to stay here?'

Drusher glanced around.

'Not really,' he said.

They drove through streets that were deserted but for burned-out vehicles and the occasional Magistratum transport rushing off on a response. He sat in the passenger seat, studying the slate, rocked by the jolts of the uneven roadway. Relief was beginning to seep into him, relief that he wasn't bound for disgrace and a custodial sentence after all. A little part of him hated Falken for his trick, but a greater part despised himself for being so foolish. Gershom wasn't his nemesis. Valentin Drusher was his own worst enemy, and his ruined life was testament to the way he had studiously taken every wrong turn destiny had ever offered him.

'Your hair's gone grey,' Macks said, her eyes on the road.

He looked up. 'I stopped dying it.'

'You dyed your hair?' she asked.

He didn't reply.

'So you've matured out of that vanity, then, Valentin?' she smirked.

'No. I just couldn't afford the treatment any more.'

She laughed, but he was sure he detected some sympathy in her tone.

'I like it,' she said after a while. 'It's distinguished.'

'You haven't changed at all,' he said.

She pulled the vehicle to a halt outside a battered townhouse where Magistratum officers were attempting to restrain nine or ten brawling men. There was blood on the pavement, and the air was lit by the blinking lamps of the armoured patrol vehicles.

Macks got out.

'Stay here,' she said. She peered back at him through the open door. 'So, is that a good thing?'

'What?' he asked.

'The fact that I haven't changed?'

'I never thought you needed much improvement,' he replied, immediately appalled that he'd made such a bold remark out loud.

Macks laughed, then slammed the door.

In the sealed quiet of the transporter, Drusher watched for a while as she waded in with her riot baton, and brought order to the scene. Then he turned his attention back to the data-slate.

Time passed.

The driver's door opened, and the transporter rocked on its springs as she clambered back in.

'I think we're looking for a carnodon,' he said.

‘Yeah?’ she said, gunning the engine and throwing the vehicle forwards in rapid acceleration.

‘Yes. I mean, working from the details here. I could be wrong if the specimens were changed after this list was made up, but it’s a simple process of elimination.’

‘Is it?’ she asked, throwing them around a street corner so fast the tyres squealed.

‘There were only four predators listed in the bombed-out pens. Discount the Mirepoix treecreeper because it’s an injector, not a biter.’

‘A what?’

‘It injects its prey with a long proboscis, and dissolves the internal organs, sucking them out.’

‘Enough.’

‘I mean, it doesn’t have a mouth.’

‘All right, all right.’

‘So, no bite wounds.’

‘Right.’

‘Right, so the saurapt from Brontotaph is off the list as well.’

Macks changed down, and raced them along another empty boulevard. ‘Because?’

‘Because it’s the size of a hab block. Falken wouldn’t have had to be drunk to spot it already.’

She grinned.

‘And the pouncer here, from Lamsarotte, we can cross that off too. It’s a felid, but far too slight to cause the wounds you showed me. Besides, I doubt it would have lasted long in this climate outside a heated pen.’

‘So we’re left with the, what did you call it?’ she asked.

‘Carnodon. From Gudrun. Throne, there shouldn’t have been one in captivity here. They’re virtually extinct, and listed on the Administratum’s prohibition order. It’s a felid too, but big, and from temperate habitats.’

‘How big?’

‘Five or six metres, maybe eight hundred kilos. Quite capable of biting off a man’s face.’

‘So, magos biologis, how do we catch a carnodon?’ she asked, heaving on the wheel.

Drusher looked up.

‘We’re... we’re going rather fast, Macks,’ he said. ‘Another call?’

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘Another breach of curfew?’ he asked.

Macks shook her head. ‘Question stands, Valentin. How do we catch a carnodon?’

The habs were clustered together at the northern extremity of the town, gathered in tight, conspiratorial knots. Acres of wasteland surrounded each stack, littered with the flotsam of war and poverty. Much of the intense fighting during the civil war had taken place in this shell-damaged suburb.

Macks slowed the transporter, and guided it between piles of shattered bricks. They were approaching one of the most ramshackle towers. Ahead, the lamps picked out a pair of Magistratum transporters, parked near the stack’s loading dock. A heavy morgue carrier was pulled up beside them, its rear hatch gaping.

‘Come on,’ Macks said.

Drusher got out into the cold, pre-dawn air. The rectangular habs stood stark against a sky slowly paling into a gold sheen. He smelled the sweet rot of garbage, and the unpleasant odour of wet rockcrete.

‘Bring your stablight,’ she said, making off across the rough ground to the group of Magistratum officers waiting by the stack entrance. She spoke to a couple of them, then signalled Drusher to follow her.

They entered the wide doorway, and began to climb the crude stairwell.

‘They’ve held off so you can get the first look at the scene,’ she said.

Drusher took a deep breath. They climbed to the fifth floor.

‘Hurry up,’ she called back to him.

‘Hang on,’ he said. Drusher stooped to examine the rough wall, touching a dark patch among the lichen with his fingertips, and then sniffing them.

‘You’ll catch something,’ Macks said, coming back down the stairs to join him.

‘I thought that’s why you hired me,’ he said. ‘Smell this. Ammonia, very strong. Other natural chemicals, pheromones. This is a territorial mark. The animal spranted here.’

‘What?’

‘It scent-marked the wall with urine.’

‘And you wanted me to sniff it?’

Drusher looked up at her. ‘It’s textbook felid behaviour. The stain suggests quantity, so we’re looking at something large.’

‘Carnodon?’

‘It fits.’

‘See if this fits too,’ she said.

The derelict hab stack had become home for vagrants, and it was rare for these dispossessed souls to have any contact with the Magistratum. But one of them had been scared enough to raise the alarm, having heard a commotion on the fifth floor.

The stack apartment was a four-room affair, a kitchen-diner, a bed vault, a lounge and a washroom cubicle. The place stank of mildew.

And another smell Drusher hadn’t encountered since Outer Udar.

Blood.

The Magistratum crew had set up pole lamps to mark the scene, and it had been pictured and recorded.

‘Watch your step,’ Macks said.

As they went in, the smell became more intense. The corpse was in the lounge area. Even Macks, hardened to the uglier aspects of life, had to turn aside for a moment.

The body was that of an older female. The legs, swathed in filthy hose and support stockings, were intact. The torso had been stripped down to the bones, and these had been broken open so that something feeding could get at the soft organs. There was no head, no arms.

‘They tell me the head’s in there,’ Macks said, indicating the kitchen area.

Drusher peered in through the doorway, glimpsing a brown, cracked object that looked like a broken earthenware pot. Except that it still had a residue of grey hair.

‘What’s this?’ Macks called. In the bedroom, her torch beam was illuminating a brown, fractured stick.

‘Arm bone,’ said Drusher. ‘Broken open to get at the marrow.’ He was remarkably composed. This was perhaps the most horrific sight that had ever greeted his eyes, but a professional detachment was masking his revulsion. The magos biologists in him was fascinated by the killing.

‘I think she was already dead,’ he said. ‘This is scavenging. A decent post-mortem will be able to confirm it. The feeder was big, but it took its time. Leisurely feeding, reducing the cadaver piece by piece, going for the most nutritional areas first. There was no struggle, no kill, although the carnodon probably made quite a bit of noise as it rendered down the carcass.’

‘Carnodon?’ she said. ‘You’re sure?’

‘I’d stake my professional credentials on it,’ he replied. ‘For what that’s worth.’

‘All right.’ Macks breathed heavily. ‘Can we get them in to clear this?’

‘Yes,’ Drusher said.

‘And can you work up something? I don’t know – a library pict, maybe one of your dandy watercolour sketches, so we know what we’re looking for?’

‘Glad to,’ he replied.

‘Good,’ Macks said. ‘You look like you need sleep.’

He shrugged. ‘Where is the Magistratum putting me up?’ he asked.

Macks replied, ‘We’ll find somewhere.’

Somewhere turned out to be a torn couch in the empty room next door to Macks’ office. It appeared from the stale bedclothes that someone else had been sleeping there on a regular basis. Drusher was too tired to complain. Besides, as far as his relationship with the planet Gershom went, this was pretty much par for the course.

He fell asleep within minutes of lying down.

He woke with a start, and found he’d only been sleeping for a couple of hours. It was barely dawn. As was often the case, rest had freed up his mind, and there was now an idea buzzing around in it so busily it had woken him. He felt strangely energised. After years of tedious dead-end employment, he was finally calling on his primary area of expertise again, using old skills that he had begun to believe had long since atrophied. He almost felt like a magos biologis.

Drusher got up, tucked in his shirt, and put on his shoes. The building was quiet and dead. He went into the hallway, and tapped on the door of Macks’ office. When he got no reply, he let himself in, and started to rummage among the dossiers piled on the wire carts.

He heard a metallic click behind him, and turned. Macks, her hair tousled, stood behind the desk. The sidearm she had aimed at him was slowly lowering.

‘It’s you,’ she grunted, her eyes puffy with sleep.

‘Throne!’ he said. ‘Where were you?’

Rubbing her face, she gestured at the floor behind the desk, where Drusher could now see a few seat cushions and a crumpled blanket.

‘You were sleeping on the floor under your desk?’ he said.

She cleared her throat, and holstered the sidearm in her belt pouch. She looked pissed off and weary.

‘Well, you got my bed, didn’t you?’ she snapped.

‘Oh,’ he said.

Macks picked up her boots and shuffled across to the office door. She leaned out and yelled, ‘Watch officer! Two caffienes before I shoot someone!’ Then she sat down on the rug, and started to pull on her footwear.

‘What time is it?’ she asked Drusher grumpily.

‘Early yet. I’m sorry.’

‘What were you doing?’

‘I wanted to check the autopsy files. From the victims. There was something I wanted to look at.’

‘That pile there,’ Macks said. ‘No, the other end.’

Drusher started to look through the files, wincing at some of the more grisly pics he encountered. Macks left the room, presumably to kill whoever it was that was being slow with the caffeine.

When she returned, he’d spread a dozen of the dossiers out on the rug, and was making notes with a slate and stylus he’d borrowed from her desk.

‘Macks,’ he began. ‘There’s something here that—’

‘Get your jacket,’ she said.

In daylight (though daylight was a loose term), Tycho didn’t look any better. From the side window of the speeding transporter, Drusher could now starkly see what had been merely spectral ruins the night before. There had been a melancholy air to the place in the darkness. Now everything was blunt and crass: the scars of fire, the pitting of assault weapons, the water-filled cavities of craters, the shock-fractures on slabs of rockcrete. Weeds fumed the city ruins, thick and unlovely, reclaiming the wasteground between tenements and stacks. The Gardens of Tycho were everywhere now, Drusher thought. The wild was reclaiming the city.

They drove in convoy with two other Magistratum vehicles, rattling down the empty thoroughfares.

‘Fresh kill,’ was all Macks would say. ‘In the Commission of Works.’

Falken was already on site, with four armed troopers in tow. Drusher wouldn’t have been able to tell that the building before him was the Commission of Works. Penetrator shells had caved in the facade, and

chewed curiously geometric shapes out of the roof. The rear of the building was a dark cave-system of intact rooms.

‘In here,’ said Falken, shouldering his riotgun, and leading them into the mangled ruins. ‘Routine sweep picked it up about thirty minutes ago.’

They clambered over fallen beams, disturbing the thick white dust. The body lay in a nest of broken floorboards.

‘Civilian volunteer,’ Falken said. ‘He was on a registered night watch here. He had a weapon, but it doesn’t seem like he got the chance to use it.’

The man lay on his side, facing them as they approached with a face that was no longer there. Something had severed his skull laterally in a line from the point of the chin to the apex of the skull. It looked to Drusher like an anatomical crosscut pict from a surgery text manual.

Drusher knelt down beside the body. The linear precision of the bite was baffling.

‘Did you sweep?’ Macks was asking Falken.

‘A brief look. Rimbaud thinks he heard something.’

Macks looked at the trooper. ‘Really?’

‘Up at back, ma’am,’ Rimbaud said. ‘There was definitely something moving around. I think it’s still here.’

‘Is that likely?’ Macks asked Drusher.

He shrugged. ‘If it was disturbed before it could feed... I suppose so.’

‘Let’s go,’ she ordered. She and Falken moved ahead, weapons lowered. ‘Valentin, you’re up,’ she called back. ‘Stick with Edvin. The rest of you cover the front. Rimbaud, show us where.’

They moved into the dark, crumbling hulk of the ruin, every footstep kicking up dust. Falken, Rimbaud and Macks made their way up a staircase that was hanging off the remains of a supporting wall. Edging forwards with the trooper named Edvin, Drusher could hear the others walking around on the floor above, creaking the distressed floor, sifting dust down at them in hourglass trickles. Drusher could also hear Edvin’s vox, turned low.

‘To your left now.’ That was Falken.

‘Don’t get too far ahead,’ Macks replied.

‘Something! No, false alarm.’

Edvin glanced nervously at Drusher.

‘All right there, sir?’ he asked.

Drusher nodded.

‘Some kind of cat?’ the trooper asked.

‘Some kind,’ Drusher replied. He was becoming very aware of the beat of his own heart.

When it happened, it happened with such ferocity and speed, Drusher barely had time to react. There was a fantastic, booming detonation – in hindsight, presumably Falken’s riotgun discharging – swiftly followed by a series of pistol shots on auto. At the same time, the vox went mad with strangled calls. The floor above Drusher shook with a violent frenzy. There was an impact, a crash. A scream. Two more blasts from a riotgun.

‘What the Throne—’ Edwin began, raising his weapon, and looking up.

The floor above them caved in. Drusher and Edwin were knocked flat, and almost buried in a cascade of broken joists, planks and falling bricks. Mortar dust filled the atmosphere like a fog, choking and stifling. Another gunshot.

Drusher struggled to his feet, pushing the broken floorboards off his legs. He could barely breathe. Edwin was on his face, unconscious. Something heavy had come straight down through the floor, and landed on him, half-crushing him.

Drusher blinked.

‘No!’ he cried.

The something heavy was the body of a Magistratum trooper, faceless, blood jetting forcibly from severed arteries. The blood sprayed up the walls, gleaming like rubies in the dust.

‘Macks!’ he cried. ‘Macks!’

He tried to reach her, though he knew it was far too late. Then something else came down through the hole in the floor. Something fast and dark and feral. It was the animal, the killer, trying to find an escape route.

It slammed Drusher over hard with one flailing limb, and he crashed into a plasterboard wall that shattered like old marzipan icing.

For a moment, just a fleeting second before he passed out, he glimpsed it. The shape.

The shape.

He came round staring up at Falken’s face.

‘He’s all right.’ Falken spat and turned away, wiping dust off his face.

Drusher sat up fast, his head pounding. ‘Macks? Macks?’

‘What?’ she asked.

Drusher saw her, crouching in the rubble in front of him. Falken was getting the dazed Edwin back on his feet.

‘Macks?’

She was leaning over the body. Drusher got up, and could see now the mutilated corpse was Rimbaud.

‘It got away,’ Macks murmured. ‘It got Rimbaud, and then it got away.’ Falken was shouting for the other troopers to sweep the rear of the building.

‘What happened?’ Drusher asked.

‘I didn’t see it,’ Macks said. ‘Falken saw something move, and fired. Then it all went to hell.’

‘It came down this way. After it had...’ Drusher paused. ‘It followed Rimbaud’s body down.’

‘You see it?’

‘I didn’t get a proper look,’ Drusher said.

Macks cursed, and walked away. Drusher crouched down beside the trooper’s body, and turned it slightly so he could look at the wound. The same clean, ghastly cut right across the face. But this time, a second one, abortive, made behind the line of the excising blow, as if the predator had been in a frenzy – alarmed, perhaps – and had made a first hasty strike before following it up. Even so the first strike, deep and into the side of the neck and head, would have killed Rimbaud outright.

But even in haste, so clean. So straight.

‘A cat? A cat did that?’ Drusher looked around. Edwin, blood dribbling from a cut above his left eye, was staring at his friend’s body.

‘That’s what the experts say,’ Drusher replied.

They drove back to the Magistratum HQ in silence. The sweep had picked up nothing. The killer had melted into the ruins beyond the Commission of Works as fast as frost in summertime.

‘You thought it was me, didn’t you?’ Macks asked finally.

‘What?’

‘The body. I heard you cry out. You thought it had got me.’

Drusher nodded. He felt they might be about to have a moment, something honest that approximated intimacy. He was prepared to admit how much he would care if anything happened to her.

‘If you can’t tell the difference between me and a hairy-arsed male trooper,’ she said, ‘I’m not holding out much hope for your observational expertise.’

He looked over at her. ‘Screw you too, Macks.’

She left him alone in her office, and let him get on with sorting the dossiers. A staffer brought him a cup of something over-brewed and over-sweetened late in the afternoon. By then, he was pinning things to the walls, and had switched to paper to make his notes. He accessed Macks' cogitator, and called up some city-plan maps.

Macks came back just as it was getting dark outside.

'I'm glad you're here,' he said. 'There's something I need to show you.'

She seemed cheerful, upbeat.

'Something I have to show you first,' she said.

Macks led him down to the morgue. A crowd of officers and uniformed staffers had gathered, and there was almost a party atmosphere. Falken was passing round bottles of contraband amasec, so everyone could take a slug.

'Here he is!' Falken cried. 'Magos Biologis Dresher!'

There was some clapping.

'Drusher,' Drusher said.

'Whatever,' Falken said, putting his arm around Drusher's shoulders. 'Couldn't have done it without you, friend! Really, you were on the money! Eh? What do think? Is this a... a...'

'Carnodon,' Drusher said, painfully aware of how big Falken was beside him, squeezing him in the hug.

The felid had been laid across four gurneys, heavy and limp in death. Its tusked snout seemed to grimace, as if it, like Drusher, wished it was somewhere else. Small, dark punctures in its belly showed where Falken had shot it.

'May I?' Drusher asked, and Falken let him go over and examine the beast. The crowd turned back to toasting and laughing.

It had once been a wonderful thing, master of its world, afraid of nothing. An apex predator. Drusher smiled sadly as he thought of the phrase. A big specimen too, maybe five and a half metres body length, nine hundred kilos healthy body weight. But at the time of its miserable, hunted death, it had been less than six hundred kilos, emaciated, its ribs poking out like tent braces. It was old too, post-mature. The coat was raddled by sarcoptic mange and laden with lice, fungus and parasites. Drusher ran his hand along its flank anyway. So knotted, gristly, starved. He peeled back the black lips and examined the dentition.

'Where did you get it?' he called out to Falken.

‘In the cellars under the Lexicon,’ Falken said, coming over. ‘We got a heads-up. We’d circulated your picture, you see. Thanks for that. I went in, saw it, and boom-boom.’

Drusher nodded.

‘Truth be told,’ Falken said, dropping his voice, ‘it didn’t put up much of a fight. But I wasn’t taking any chances.’

‘I understand.’

Falken turned back to the crowd.

‘For Onnie Rimbaud, poor bastard!’ he cried. ‘This one’s for you, son!’

Falken offered the nearest bottle to Drusher. Drusher shook his head.

‘Thanks for your help, Dresher,’ Falken said.

‘Drusher.’

Macks came over.

‘I want to thank you on behalf of the division, Valentin,’ she said. ‘You got us our result. I’ll bill the Administratum for a whole week, fair enough? Go get your things together. Someone will drive you home this evening.’

Drusher nodded.

‘I have a transporter waiting,’ Macks said. Drusher’s bags were in a neat stack beside the office door. He was closing the last of the dossiers, and sliding them back onto her carts.

‘Right,’ he said.

‘Well, it’s been good to have you on board. Thanks. Like old times, right?’

‘Like Outer Udar, Macks? I get the distinct impression you remember that more fondly than I do.’

‘Things’ll work out, Valentin,’ she said.

‘Before I go,’ he said, ‘I’d like you to look at something.’

‘What?’

‘Let’s put it this way. I’d hate to have you come all the way up the coast to get me again.’

Macks frowned. ‘What are you on about now?’

‘The killer wasn’t – isn’t – that cat.’

Macks wiped her hand across her lips as if encouraging patience. ‘Go on.’

‘I said from the start it wasn’t an animal.’

‘You also told me to look for a carnodon.’

‘Let me show you something,’ Drusher said. He held up a data-slate. The compact screen showed a display of the city, overlaid with rune symbols. ‘I’ve done some collating. See here? I’ve mapped all the sites where the victims were found. Thirty-two bodies.’

‘I did that myself, on an ongoing basis. I saw nothing. No pattern, no discernible spread.’

‘I agree,’ said Drusher. ‘I mean, there’s a certain concentration of kill-sites here, in this crescent, but most of the others are too wayward, too random.’

‘So?’

‘That first body you showed me, in the morgue. So cleanly, so particularly cut. Minimal signs of feeding, if any at all. Just like the body today in the Commission of Works. And Rimbaud.’

‘Right. The face bitten off.’

Drusher nodded. ‘Yes, except I don’t think it was bitten. Remember how clean I said it was? I mean almost sterile. None of the bacterial traces one would expect from an animal bite. Especially not from an old, diseased predator with gums receding from vitamin deficiency. Macks, I could wiggle that poor cat’s teeth out with my fingers.’

Her face had gone hard.

‘Keep going, Valentin,’ she said.

‘The body in the stacks we went to look at. That was the work of the carnodon. It had mauled and eaten the corpse away. I checked the autopsy files. Nine of the cases were just like that. Gnawed. The victims were all either dead already or helpless. Old, infirm. The carnodon had escaped from the zoological gardens, but it was weak and long past its hunting prime. It roamed the city, not preying, but scavenging. That was all it could do any more.’

‘What are you telling me?’ Macks asked quietly.

‘Look at the map again. Here.’ Drusher flipped a switch. ‘Now I’ve taken away the bodies I can attribute to the cat. Cleans it up a bit, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ she admitted.

‘The old carnodon was hungry and opportunistic. It had no pattern. It just roamed and fed where it could. What we’re left with is a much more precise zone. Almost territorial. The killings here were like poor Rimbaud – swift, savage, clean. No feeding.’

‘But it’s still an odd crescent-shaped spread. How can we triangulate from that?’

‘Look at the map, Macks. Territory is determined not just by hunter but also by prey. The crescent-shaped dispersal covers an area east of the Commission of Works. There are none to the west because that’s an area interdicted by the Martial Order Division. It doesn’t kill there, Macks, because there’s no one there to kill.’

‘Oh Throne...’ she murmured.

‘And this is the good bit,’ Drusher smiled. ‘Look what happens when I mirror the dispersal, projecting it as if there were quarry in all directions. The crescent becomes...?’

‘A circle.’

‘Right, a circle. There’s your focus. There’s your bloody pattern. That’s its territory. Right there.’

Macks was driving faster than ever. In the back seat sat Edwin and a trooper called Roderin. Both were checking their riotgun loads.

‘You’re sure about this?’ Macks hissed.

‘I’ve very little left to stake on it,’ Drusher replied, ‘my professional credentials being long since used up.’

‘Don’t get smart,’ she warned. ‘You two ready?’ she called over her shoulder.

Edwin and Roderin both replied in the affirmative. Edwin leaned forwards.

‘I thought we’d got this thing, sir,’ he said. ‘I mean, I thought Falken had plugged it.’

‘He got the cat,’ Drusher said. ‘But the cat wasn’t it.’

Macks began to slow down, and it was lucky she did. A second Magistratum transporter swung out in front of them from a side street, and ploughed ahead.

‘Falken,’ Macks whispered.

They pulled up outside the Commission of Works. Falken had two troopers with him, Levy and Mantagne.

‘What the hells is this about?’ Falken asked belligerently. He was still half-drunk from the party in the morgue.

‘We’re onto a lead,’ Macks said. ‘Behave.’

Falken looked at Drusher. 'I got it, stone dead. Boom-boom. What is this crap now?'

'Something else,' Drusher said.

They spread out in a line, entering the weed-choked waste behind the Commission of Works.

'Macks?' Drusher called. She came over to him.

'I'd like a weapon.'

'In the old days, you—'

'I'd really like a weapon,' he repeated.

Macks nodded, and lowered her riotgun in one hand as she pulled the handgun from her holster. She handed it to him.

'The safety's by—'

'I know how they work,' he snapped.

They pushed on.

'So, this is all about territory, right?' she said.

Drusher nodded. 'You saw the map. We're entering its territory now. Its hunting ground.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Like I said, you saw the map. The thing is, we're not talking about animal instinct. Not territory as a predator would understand it. We're talking about orders.'

'What? Orders?'

'What is this place, Macks?'

'The Commission of Works.'

'And what's behind it?'

'Just rubble, Valentin.'

'Yeah, but what was it before it was rubble?'

'It was the main building of the Administratum here in Tycho. Before the tank shells levelled it.'

'Exactly. The Administratum centre. Dead centre of the spread pattern. During the civil war, something was ordered to guard that vital point, secure it, defend it.'

Macks glared at him. 'A man?'

Drusher shrugged. 'Something. Something that's still doing it. Macks, I glimpsed the killer in the Commission of Works, right after it killed Rimbaud. It was humanoid.'

Spread wide, the line of officers entered the ruins of the Administratum. Some parts of the ruin were two or three storeys tall, held up, crippled and crooked, by the ferrosteel bars stripped through the rockcrete.

There were weeds everywhere, flourishing. Tinsel-barb and frondwort, cabbage speculus and the limp foliage of climbing tracedy. The air was pungent with root-rot, stagnant water, mould.

Drusher slowly circled around. Macks was nearby, riotgun raised. He glanced left and saw Falken bending in under a broken doorway. To his right, Edvin was aiming his weapon at the overhung, plant-swathed walls.

Levy raised his clucking auspex box. 'Getting something, very weak. It's coming from the west.'

Falken nodded and disappeared. Macks hurried onwards. Mantagne covered her, glancing nervously up at the blooming foliage. Weapon clenched high, Roderin shuffled through a ruined archway.

'Getting hot now, getting really hot,' Levy called, lifting up his auspex, which was burring like a cicada.

'Throne, it must be right on us!'

Falken's gun went off. Once. Twice. Then another one echoed it. Macks started forward, running, and Drusher followed. Levy was right behind them. Mantagne rushed around to the other side of the wall.

There was a scream. Two more shots. Three.

Mantagne was dead. He had been sliced open from the scalp to the sternum. Blood was still spitting from his opened body, high into the air.

'Throne!' Macks cried, turning around. She heard Falken fire again, then Edvin. 'Where is it? Where is it?'

Levy almost crashed into her from behind, following his auspex blindly.

'Right there! There!'

Macks aimed and fired, once, twice, grinding back the slide each time. She put a huge hole in the facing wall.

Shots again, distant, from Falken and Edvin. Macks and Levy followed the sound. Pistol raised, Drusher turned the other way.

This predator was smart. Very smart and very able. It knew all about misdirection. It could out-think any regular human, and then split him open. It understood military tactics because that is what it dealt in. It had been programmed. It had been given orders.

Breathing hard, Drusher edged around another shattered arch, his weapon braced. His pulse was racing, but this felt entirely odd. This wasn't about

his trained skills any more. This wasn't about an animal, whose habits and behaviours he had been schooled to understand. This was the opposite.

So he did the opposite. Facing any hungry predator, the last thing a magos biologists would want to do is step into the open. But he did so, turning a full circle, his pistol aimed in both hands.

On the rubble floor before him, he saw Roderin. Roderin was dead, just like the others.

Drusher circled again, weapon tight.

The killer flew at him.

Drusher pulled the trigger and kept it pulled. Eight, nine, ten rounds, the full clip boomed out of Macks' borrowed sidearm, and hit the killer head-on.

It fell, burst open, broken, puffed pink intestines spilling from its punctured torso. A man, but not a man. A product of the civil war. Augmentally strengthened, augmentally wired, its eyes a black visor, wires stapled into its flesh, its palsied hands curled over to expose the whirring chainblades sewn into its wrists.

The chainblades whined as they came together. Despite the rounds he had put into it, it got back up. And leapt at Drusher's face.

His gun clicked, dry.

'Down, Valentin!'

From behind him, Macks fired her riotgun, and the killer's head burst like a tomato. The impact knocked it sideways. When it landed, its chainblades were still whirring involuntarily.

'All right?' she asked Drusher.

He nodded.

'You were right. As ever.'

'Glad to be of service.'

'Seriously,' she said, leading him out of the ruins as Falken and Edwin fired shot after shot into the killer to make sure it was dead. 'Seriously, Drusher, I owe you.'

'A week's pay, you said. I do what I do.'

He began to walk away, picking his path through the rubble.

'Valentin, I could put it down as two weeks, no one would know.'

He shrugged. He looked back at her.

'What about a ticket off this rock?' he said, with a thin, sad smile.

'Can't afford that,' she said. 'Sorry. Budgets and all.'

‘I had to ask,’ said Drusher. He sat down on a chunk of bricks.

‘Look,’ said Macks. ‘You’ve seen how stretched things are down here. The Martial Order Division can barely keep up. We can use all the help we can get, particularly sharp, educated minds with a thing for details. What do you think?’

‘How would that work?’ Drusher asked.

Macks shrugged. ‘Not sure. I could probably second your services on a temporary basis using the emergency powers. It’s not much, I know, but...’

Drusher frowned. ‘My teaching post isn’t much, but at least it’s safe.’ He handed her back the pistol.

‘You sure?’ she asked.

‘Whenever I spend any time with you, Macks, it ends up getting exciting,’ he said. ‘Rather too exciting for a man of my disposition.’

‘Hey,’ she replied, as if hurt, ‘I haven’t got you killed so far.’

Drusher smiled. ‘So far.’

Macks nodded.

‘All right,’ she said. She kissed him briefly on the cheek, and turned to walk back to the transporters.

Every wrong turn destiny had ever offered him...

And which was this? Drusher sighed.

‘Macks?’ he called out.

‘Yes?’

‘Would I get my own desk?’

Turning back, she smirked. ‘Valentin, you’ll even get your own couch.’

Drusher got to his feet, and wandered down the path after her.

THE KEELER IMAGE

OceanofPDF.com



Medonae the Eater, so called because of his appetites, had declared an auction, and word of this sale brought dealers and speculators from across the subsector, despite the isolation of his home.

An item in the catalogue drew my attention. I sent an agent in advance to confirm the provenance, and when word came back to me that it seemed authentic, I made arrangements to attend the sale in person.

Medonae the Eater dwelt on a war-burned rock called Pallik. Its orbit and revolutions blessed Pallik with a complex and irregular pattern of days and nights, some long, some short, some bright, some dim, which had led to the publication of various thick zodiacs and ephemeris tracts. I was not much bothered with learning the names and durations of the day-night cycle. All I knew was that I should avoid the long and formidable ‘burnday’, a periodic event when all three suns rose together.

Many of those attending the auction arrived by cutter and orbital boat, setting down in the bleak flats of the desert outside the sloping walls of Medonae’s palace. Others came into the local city, Baryt Prime, and then hired caravans to trek out to the palace, six hundred kilometres beyond the city gates. Caravans made the trip almost daily, laden with goods from the city’s produce markets, such was Medonae’s appetite.

I set down on a mesa five kilometres from the palace, and made the way on foot. It was a lowday, when only the second sun made an appearance in the heavens, and then only for a brief interval of six and a half standard hours.

It was cold and dry. Through my glare shields, the sky was a deep, rich blue and the sun a white ball that cast lens flare when I turned my head. Light glinted on the hulls of shuttles and cutters parked on their landing frames on the desert floor. I saw the thin dust plume of a caravan procession fifteen kilometres out.

The palace was of fair size. It was all that remained of a city that had been levelled by war. Portions of it sloped away into the desert sands in litters of rubble, suggesting that a great deal more of the ancient habitation lay below ground or was, at least, buried in the bosom of history.

Sentinels at the gatehouse watched me approach.

‘You come to Medonae?’ asked one, his voice a vox-hiss through his rebreather mask. Both of them were dressed in plate and bodygear that had once been Astra Militarum issue, now repainted in the bright colours of a circus.

‘I do,’ I replied.

‘Your name?’

‘Gregor Eisenhorn,’ I replied. I saw no reason to lie.

‘And your standing?’

I showed them my Inquisitorial rosette.

Neither blanched.

‘Have you come to purge us, sir?’ one of them laughed.

‘I don’t know,’ I answered. ‘Has anyone here denied the sanctity of the Throne?’

‘Not us,’ chuckled the other. ‘We are all obedient to Holy Terra here, all of us.’

‘Then my business is purely to bid and buy,’ I said.

I was admitted.

The entry halls of the palace were busy with visitors. Each one, it seemed, had brought an ample entourage. Medonae’s servitors were conveying trays of food and drink from the kitchens, each new dish announced by a liveried chamberlain who declared the name of the delicacy as though it were another guest at the proceedings. I was offered a flask of water – a ritual gift for any traveller arriving out of the desert – which I took, and a beaker of wine that I did not. Various lots from the forthcoming sale had been set on display throughout the halls so that they could be viewed. I saw prayer-wheels from the Long Graves of Thracian, diadems from the Slave Worlds, a fine bust of Saint Kiodrus still in its satin-lined box, and a good oil of Guilliman, done by Manxis of Eustis Majoris, or so the ticket stated. The composition was well enough, but the brushwork lacked the finesse of Manxis himself. I thought that, most likely, it was a copy or the work of his school.

I was admiring it when a voice at my shoulder said, 'I know why you're here.'

I turned.

'I am Medonae,' the man said. He was tall, slender, smiling, dressed in a green bodyglove and half-cloak. He wore what might be described as too much jewellery, including a tiara of pearl and crystal.

'You are Medonae?'

'I am, in fact, his mouth,' the man said. His smile was alarmingly broad. 'He speaks through me, and I conduct his business.'

'You are his proxy, or an avatar?' I asked.

'An avatar,' he replied. The tiara and the rings, I realised, were part of a more extensive suite of telekine systems that allowed Medonae to puppet the man and operate through him.

'You are Gregor Eisenhorn,' he said, 'of the ordos.'

'I am.'

'Your reputation precedes you. There can be only one item in this sale that would attract an individual such as yourself. Would you like to see it?'

He led me to a side chapel. The lowday sun fell pale through the bars of the tall windows. The object stood on a pedestal, protected by light screens. It was a vitreous plate milled in plastek, about a third of a metre square.

'Magnificent, isn't it, sir?' Medonae's mouth said.

It was the most appalling thing I had ever seen.

'Exquisite.'

'I'll leave you to enjoy it,' he said.

I wasn't alone in the room. Several other visitors were viewing the piece. One was a hard-set man with extensive augmetic optics sutured into his skull.

'Quite a thing,' he mused.

'Indeed,' I replied.

'Genuine,' he added. His optics whirred. 'I can gauge the age of the glass, the plastek sheath. The format of the plate matches the kind she was known to use. A miracle beyond measure that something so fragile could have survived so long, when so much else perished.'

'Truly,' I agreed.

'But even more,' he went on, 'the image itself. The composition. She had an extraordinary eye as a remembrancer. I doubt any soul in the Imperium has ever matched her skill at the capture of pictis.'

‘This they say of her,’ I said. ‘An exceptional gift. Which is why she was chosen, of course, for the expedition.’

‘To think,’ he sighed, ‘that someone had that kind of superlative talent, beyond any before or since, and yet that is *still* not the thing she is most famous for.’

He looked at me. His optics clicked and buzzed.

‘What do you think?’ he asked. ‘Do you think the most incredible thing about it is that it is an original pict, made ten thousand years ago, by the hallowed founder of the Imperial Truth? Or that it is a pict of Horus Lupercal?’

‘I think the most incredible thing about it,’ I replied, ‘is that it is sitting on sale here and not sequestered in a vault on far-off Terra.’

Euphrati Keeler was a remembrancer. In the last years of the Great Crusade, armed with a good eye and a picter, she had been appointed to the 63rd Expeditionary Force, to observe and record the operation of the Luna Wolves. Her work was remarkable. Her fame spread. The Warmaster himself regarded her with favour. In that distant age, the God-Emperor had decreed that the operation of the Imperium should be documented by artists and historians to make a chronicle of the foundation of the Age of Man. Such had been the mindset then: that the great work of engineering a civilisation should be honestly, freely and independently recorded.

That does not sound like the Emperor I know.

Such freedom ended, of course, in the atrocities that followed, in the years of bloodshed we now call the Heresy War. Keeler was present on the ground at the start of it. She was a witness to the first acts of bloodshed. She stood in time at the zero point where history turned a corner, and she did so with a picter in her hand, capturing that transformation.

Her story did not end there. She so easily might have been one of the trillions extinguished in the fires that followed. Her name is not commonly known today... except that it *is*, as Saint Euphrati. She was blessed with divine grace and gifts, and from her – and those few close to her in those bleak years – the essence of the Imperial Creed was born. She was one of the first saints. From her, and those disciples around her, arose the tenets of the Lectitio Divinitatus, the truth of us all, that the Emperor of Mankind is not a man, but a god. It is through her that the truth was recognised. It was in her that our faith was born.

The man with the optics was called Sejan Karyl. We returned to the main halls and sat together, talking of what we had seen.

‘The pict itself isn’t the prize, you know?’ he said.

‘It is beyond value,’ I said. ‘An image of Lupercal, in life, before he fell. The beauty and strength of his visage speak to the depth of the catastrophe that occurred.’

‘Some might say that none should look upon it, ever,’ he said.

‘Who might say that?’

‘The Inquisition,’ he replied, ‘of which, I hear, you are a part.’

‘I believe it should be seen,’ I said. ‘As a warning – to show how even the greatest perfection can be blackened... To refresh our determination to guard against the dark.’

He shrugged.

‘If,’ he said, ‘it is Horus *before* he fell.’

‘You think it after?’

‘Would that not be a stranger lesson? If that was his face *after* Chaos stole him? Chaos hides its nature well.’

‘You say it’s not the prize,’ I said, changing the subject.

‘According to the catalogue,’ he said, ‘it comes with notes. Some frail documents written in her hand, describing the image and the circumstances of its capture.’

‘You’ve seen them?’

Karyl shook his head.

‘They are reserved for the successful buyer alone. But I have heard of their contents.’

I had too, naturally. That was partly why I had come. It was said the notes were revelatory. That they showed, in Keeler’s own, authenticated script, that she considered Horus a man, not a transformed, daemonic being. Further, they related that it had been commonly known at the time that the Emperor denied His divinity. He had formally declared that He was not a god, and sought to suppress the notion that He was. The *Lectitio Divinitatus* was already growing back then. The notes showed that the Emperor wanted it proscribed and forbidden.

They showed that the Emperor did not believe Himself to be a god. Keeler and her companion saints had created the foundation of Imperial faith *against* the Emperor’s express wishes.

That was a different kind of heresy, and I wasn't sure if the heretic was Keeler or, somehow, the Emperor Himself.

'There's no way to know the truth,' I said.

'The truth is in the writing,' said Karyl.

'The *danger*,' I corrected him, 'for truth is arbitrary – it's what people will do with it. If one, shall we say, stood against the Imperial Truth, one might use a pict and manuscript from such an august and exceptional source as the basis for a new creed.'

'To undermine the faith and deny the Emperor's divinity?'

'It is not reaching to imagine so.'

'And that, I presume, is why the Inquisition is here... To seize the image and remove that possibility.'

'I never said why I was here,' I replied.

'Not you.'

He nodded gently in the direction of a woman on the far side of the hall. She was talking with other guests.

'Halanor Kurtecz,' said Karyl. 'Ordo Hereticus. So I am told.'

'If the Ordo Hereticus wanted the Keeler image,' I replied, 'they would have stormed the palace, taken it, put all within to the sword, and levelled the site from orbit.'

'Maybe,' he said. 'Unless they wanted to find out who was interested first, to observe the individuals a relic of this kind brings out of the woodwork.'

He was right. I had thought as much. The sale was private, but it was still bait of the first magnitude. From my seat, I could see at least six persons of interest from the ordo watch-lists: renegades, recidivists and heretics, lured into the open by the mouth-watering promise of a truly blasphemous artefact. If I had been in control of Ordo Hereticus operations, I would have stayed my hand, planted agents in the palace, and waited for the sale. Then, in one stroke, I would have taken possession of the heretical image, and also ended a dozen key enemies of the Imperium, possibly obtaining enough information, via torture and interrogation, to bring down most of the cult networks in the subsector.

In a way, that was why I had come. I didn't want the Keeler image. I wanted to see it, but I had no desire to own it. It was too dangerous to exist. I had come to see who the offering of it might bring out.

One *in particular*.

And I was sure I had found her. Karyl, with his sharp, augmented eyes, had spotted her already. Halanor Kurtecz. She was no inquisitor. Sensor templating and psionic pattern recognition had registered enough positives: disguise, masking, juvenat treatments... They could all hide a lot.

But I was reasonably sure that Halanor Kurtecz was in fact the arch-heretic Lilean Chase.

The Cognitae, the oldest, greatest and most pernicious cult of Chaos in history, was present in the person of their legendary and elusive leader. Only something like the Keeler image of Horus Lupercal had the power to draw her out of hiding.

My long and bloody work was about to be completed.

Half an hour before the start of the sale, I was summoned to see Medonae.

He was in a private chamber. His mouth, all smiles as before, greeted me at the door and led me in.

Medonae the Eater had stopped being a functional human being many years ago. His appetite had got the better of him. His pallid, physical bulk, a pyramid of flesh that weighed over nine tons, was supported in a frame of suspensor pods and lifter bars. He no longer had discernible limbs. Gangs of slaves worked to massage oils into his flesh to keep it supple, a never-ending process, while trains of servitors carried in a ceaseless procession of foodstuffs that were fed to him by hovering cyberdrones high in the framework rigging.

It was hard to make out his actual face: just a small dot near the summit of the mountain of meat.

‘My dear Inquisitor Eisenhorn,’ he said, using his mouth. ‘I wanted a word. I have a feeling that today will not end well. I want your assurance that you will not seek to prosecute me.’

‘You have staged a sale, Medonae,’ I replied. ‘I know of no laws you have broken.’

‘Your assurance, please, sir.’

‘You have it. May I say, Medonae, that if you feel this auction will go badly, you should not have orchestrated it.’

‘I would not have,’ his mouth said, smiling. ‘I worked to arrange a private sale for the image. A private sale. But it was not to be.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. My psychic powers detected a slight tremor. Fear, perhaps, or trepidation. The infinitesimal artificial delay

between Medonae's thought process and its delivery by his mouth avatar gave me a window into his mind.

'I decided an auction would be best,' his mouth was saying.

I was forced to arrange this sale against my will, his mind was thinking.

I threw myself to the left.

Las-beams, bright as a sun's heart, scorched the ground where I had been standing.

Medonae had been coerced into this face-to-face meeting too. I cursed myself for not realising sooner that a man like Medonae the Eater, so ashamed of his physical state that he used an avatar for personal interaction, would never request to see anyone in person.

I rolled hard, incidentally knocking the mouth off his feet. The teeth of the trap were two cyberskulls, sweeping down from the high roofspace, their las kill-systems cycling for a second shot. A beam scored the floor behind me. Another struck the mouth as he rose, cutting him clean through. He dropped again with a gasp, face down, spattering the tiles with the gore and internal organs released by his bisection.

High above, in the rigging, Medonae's real mouth wailed with pain from the psychic feedback.

I cut loose, unleashing my mind at the grinning cyberskulls that whizzed towards me. One fierce mental jab, and I blew out the auto-control mechanisms, freeing them from the psionic impulse that directed them. One plunged like a meteor into the ground and exploded. The other whistled over my shoulder at high speed, out of control, and smashed against the chamber wall.

Sparks showered down from Medonae the Eater's rigging. My jab had burned out Medonae's telekine array too.

Three men burst into the chamber. I recognised them as members of Halanor Kurtecz's entourage. They were heavysset, powerful, fast.

And psyk-shielded.

I went for my sidearm, but the first was on me. He had a hooked dagger, which I blocked. I rolled backwards, hurling him over me onto the floor. I was back on my feet before he was, and swept his legs out from under him.

Turning, I drew my Tronsvasse handgun, and cut down the other two. The impact of the shots smashed both of them down hard.

The first man landed on my shoulders, his arm around my throat, bending me backwards. Only the wrist of my gun hand was stopping his dagger

from plunging into my face. I threw an elbow, but it didn't connect. The man's strength was augmetically amplified. He was an engineered killer, a lifeward or a Cognitae murderform.

I have been crippled for decades. My feet, legs and lower back are sheathed in a heavy scaffold of metal calipers to allow me movement. I stamped backwards with one iron-shod boot, and crushed the arch of the killer's left foot.

He snorted in agony. His grip slackened slightly, and I tried the elbow again.

As he reeled backwards, I swung around and struck him across the head with my Tronsvasse. He fell sideways, his skull cracked, blood squirting from his ear.

Shots tore past me. More members of the Kurtecz crew had rushed into the chamber. They were firing hard-round autopistols and las-snubs.

I fired back as I ran for cover, smashing through a row of startled onlookers: bemused servitors with their trays of fine food who had come to a standstill, order systems shut, and were watching the pandemonium unfold. I knocked two clean over, and they fell, spilling their trays. Ambush fire from my would-be killers ripped into the line, dropping more of the confused slave-units. Plates smashed. Trays of gourmet food crashed to the ground.

My attackers fanned out across the room. My shots – snapped off between the milling, bewildered servitors – were driving Chase's men into cover on the far side of Medonae's mass. One of them had holstered his pistol, and was deploying a rotator cannon from the pack on his back.

I ducked.

The raking fire ripped across the floor, chewed through the servitors, and demolished the tiled decoration of the wall. Chips of enamelled ceramics and glass from the ornate windows showered in all directions. I heard the cannon's motor whining as the gunman changed munitions packs.

Shots screamed in from another angle. This was fire from a hellgun. The shots, placed with indecent accuracy, exploded brackets on the rigging that supported Medonae's mass.

There was a long, ugly shriek of metal giving way, then the whole nine-ton bulk of Medonae the Eater rolled sideways, hurling servitors and squealing slaves into the air.

Medonae rolled like a landslip, and crushed the killers where they crouched in ambush.

One survived, broke free, and ran. Another hellgun shot detonated his head.

I rose, cautiously. The air smelled of smoke, blood, food and skin oil. Slaves were wailing, weeping, nursing broken limbs.

Harlon Nayl padded into view, his hellgun up to his cheek and ready to fire.

‘All right?’ he asked me.

‘Fine,’ I replied.

Nayl had been my advance agent.

‘I was wondering where you were,’ I said.

‘Keeping out of sight, like you told me,’ he said.

I looked at the tumbled mass of Medonae the Eater. He was alive, helpless, mewling. Slaves were struggling to right him before his own bodyweight compressed his organs into failure. The blood of Chase’s men seeped out from under him.

‘I gave him an assurance,’ I said.

‘I didn’t,’ said Nayl with a grin. He knelt beside his final kill, rolled the body over, and fished something out of the man’s jacket. He showed me.

An Inquisitorial badge. Nayl raised his eyebrows significantly.

‘Cognitae, Harlon,’ I said, ‘posing as Ordo Hereticus.’

He shrugged.

‘We have to find Chase.’

‘You mean Kurtecz?’ he asked.

‘That’s the name she’s using.’

‘It’s really her?’

‘Seems so,’ I said. ‘I can’t believe we’ve finally got this close.’

‘Well, it’s been a jolly journey getting here,’ said Nayl. ‘The fun, the friendship. The journey’s more important than the destination, isn’t that what they say?’

I looked at him.

He sighed.

‘Just trying to lighten the mood,’ he said.

‘Chase will want the Keeler image,’ I said. ‘Come on.’

Death, gunfire and word that the Ordo Hereticus was cutting loose, had caused panic in the palace. Guests and prospective buyers were fleeing with

their entourages. Nayl and I pushed through the press of bodies, and made for the side chapel where the image had been put on display.

Sejan Karyl was lifting the Keeler image off its stand. His hands were gloved. An armoured carry-casket lay open at his feet, ready to receive it.

‘Helping yourself?’ I asked. I aimed my Tronsvasse at him.

Karyl smiled ruefully.

‘I think the sale is off,’ he said, ‘and this is something I am anxious to obtain.’

He laid the glass plate gently in the casket, and turned back to the display stand. Under the velvet cushion was a small packet. Keeler’s writings, the real prize.

‘I can’t let you take that,’ I said. ‘Halanor Kurtecz... Have you seen her?’

‘No,’ said Karyl. He was busy with the packet, opening the seal.

‘Leave that,’ I said. ‘Think carefully, Karyl. When did you last see Kurtecz?’

‘She fled, I think,’ he said. He smiled. ‘It’s funny... I never thought I’d be grateful to the Ordo Hereticus, but thanks to them, this is now mine.’

Nayl took a step towards him, his hellgun aimed.

‘My boss said put it down, so put it down. You’ve got some front. There are two guns trained on you and you *still* think you’re going to walk out of here with that?’

I glanced around. Karyl was confident in something. But what?

‘I should thank you too, I suppose,’ Karyl said to me. ‘But for you, the ordo would not have driven this operation, and Kurtecz—’

‘She isn’t Ordo Hereticus. She isn’t Halanor Kurtecz,’ I said. ‘Her name is Lilean Chase.’

Karyl looked at me. An expression of delight filled his face.

‘Oh,’ he said, laughing. ‘I had thought so *highly* of you, but now I find you’re a dolt like all the rest. Lilean Chase? You’re so wrong, it’s hysterical.’

He opened the packet and began to read.

‘Delightful,’ he murmured. ‘Keeler is quite explicit. The Emperor is not a god. He disavows any effort to name Him so. You see, here? She states that it was her encounter with daemons in the presence of Horus Lupercal that drove her to extremes of belief. If daemons exist, then to her a god must exist too. The universe could not be so cruel, otherwise. The existence of a god was necessary to counterbalance the horror of the warp. The Lectitio

Divinitatus is based on a lie. Imperial faith is based upon fear. The “saint” admits it.’

‘Hand that to me,’ I said. ‘It is a deeply heretical text. It’s going nowhere.’

‘This?’ Karyl smiled, gesturing with the papers. ‘This is just the bonus prize, our reward for being patient today. It will make a nice addition to our library. It doesn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know.’

‘You are Cognitae,’ I said.

‘Yes, Gregor. Lilean sends her regards. She had hoped to meet you in person one day, given the years you’ve been searching for her. But she’s busy elsewhere. She sent me to collect this. *Your* road ends here.’

Nayl raised his hellgun, and aimed it at the man’s head.

‘I don’t think you’re in much of a position to issue threats like that,’ he said.

‘I’m not,’ said Karyl. ‘Today... this sale, it was a sting operation. The Ordo Hereticus learned that Medonae had the image. They knew it would be an irresistible lure to heretic groups. They coerced him into announcing an auction rather than trying to sell it privately. They knew the Cognitae would send an agent to get it.’

He grinned.

‘That’s *me*, by the way.’

‘Halanor Kurtecz—’ I began.

‘Is an inquisitor,’ he replied. ‘Ordo Hereticus. She’s running this operation. This sale was bait for the prize *she*’s after.’

‘The Cognitae—’

‘Gods, *no!* A far *greater* heretic. The renegade psyker, the diabolus... Gregor Eisenhorn. This was all for your benefit, Gregor. *You* are the wanted man here. Your ex-masters, the Ordo Hereticus, want you ended.’

From the halls behind me, I heard screams, and the sound of weapons-fire. With Nayl covering Karyl, I went back to the chamber door to look.

Ordo Hereticus kill-teams were sweeping into Medonae’s palace, slaughtering every living thing they could find. They had co-opted Tempestus Scions to do the bloodwork. I saw Inquisitor Kurtecz among the storm troops, ordering them on, relaying messages to find me and detain me at all costs.

I had believed I was setting a trap for Chase and the wretched Cognitae, but in truth it was a trap set for me. I was impressed at the skill and flair

with which Kurtecz and her colleagues had lured me out of hiding.

I was horrified to see, now more clearly than ever, how much of an outcast I had become. To the Ordo Hereticus, I was as abominable as the Cognitae.

Today, the Cognitae were but a footnote, and Chase had used her opportunist cunning to lift a great treasure while the ordo and I kept each other busy.

I had been outplayed by both sides: the Cognitae *and* my former masters.

I felt sick. The ordos were blind if they could not distinguish between me and a threat as malevolent as the Cognitae cult. I had been right to cut my ties and continue my work alone. That knowledge gave me some small comfort.

Harlon cried out. I turned to find him knocked to the ground. Karyl had the sealed carry-casket in his hand, and was aiming a lasgun at Nayl.

Impressive. It took a lot to outsmart Harlon Nayl, especially when he had a gun to your head.

‘I’ll be leaving now, Gregor,’ said Karyl.

I shot at him. My blasts withered in mid-air. Karyl – or whatever his true name was – was a high-function psyker. That’s how he’d floored Nayl, and why he had seemed so confident. He’d hidden the power earlier, but now it was boiling out of him. I took the brunt of it, and it hurled me back into the wall.

I felt several ribs break.

But, at last, someone had underestimated me. I was a high-function psyker *too*. Karyl had power, but Chase should have sent someone with considerably more. Staying in the dark places had its advantages. People didn’t know what I was truly capable of. Chase did not appreciate who she was dealing with.

My power had been blocked earlier by the Inquisition’s mind-shields. Now it was free, and it was fuelled by my anger and frustration.

I yelled a single word of power.

The force of it, like a flaming shock wave in the air, struck Sejan Karyl, and threw him not just into the chamber’s back wall but *through* it. Stonework ruptured. A terrible, blinding light shone in through the demolished hole.

I pulled down my glare shields, and helped Nayl to his feet. He pulled on his goggles too, and we drew up the heavy hoods of our coats.

Outside, the desert was too bright to look at. The heat was immense. While we had been inside the palace, lowday had ended, a brief night had flickered past, and burnday had begun.

Karyl lay on his back on a heap of rubble. Every bone in his body was shattered, but he was still alive. Blood from his wounds was cooking off him, and his exposed flesh was frying. He held the packet of Euphrati Keeler's ancient manuscript in one blackened claw of a hand, but the paper was already burning.

He was trying to put it out, but he was on fire too.

I watched his body burn, the papers with it.

'Get Medea on the vox,' I said to Nayl. 'Tell her to bring the gun-cutter in. We need rapid extraction.'

He nodded, and I heard him speaking Glossia into his vox-headset.

I opened my mind.

+Cherubael? Can you hear me?+

+Of course, Gregor.+

+I need your assistance.+

+My, my, Gregor. Do you need me to come and kill lots and lots of people for you?+

I hesitated. I thought for a moment of the Tempestus Scions and Inquisition teams ploughing through the palace at our heels, just minutes away from finding us.

'Yes,' I said, with great reluctance.

+I didn't quite hear that, Gregor.+

+Yes.+

Nayl and I took the armoured carry-casket, and set off into the burning desert. Medea was en route, less than a minute away.

We got a fair distance clear of the palace, and I turned to look back, in time to see a light come down from the sky that was brighter and more dreadful than the burnday glare of the three suns.

Medonae's palace began to die with volcanic finality.

I looked away.

From somewhere, I heard a deep, satisfied laugh.

It was probably the daemonhost, delighting in his slaughter, but just for a moment, I thought it had come, echoing, from the casket in my hand.

From the smiling, noble image that Euphrati Keeler had made so long before.

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PERIHELION

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An hour into the symposium it became clear we weren't all going to get out alive.

I'd come to watch. To spectate. Covering my identity with the paperwork of an archaeolinguist from Shurfath, the local universitariate, and disguising my face and build with scholar's robes and a falsehood, I'd come to sit among the academics and the savants in the gallery.

I lie. I hadn't come to watch. I'd come to see *him*. It had been a long time since I'd last seen him. Fifty years? A century? I lose count.

Bader Vecum had died. That was the start of it. Bader Vecum, eleventh son of an eleventh son, the last discernible branch of a noble house line that had ruled the island nation of Maelificer for thirty generations, had died. You know the island, I'm sure. In the cold, green northern oceans of Gudrun, in the Helican sub; a place of mild summers and dark winters, of ice-capped peaks and geothermal power, of ancient towns etched into the steep sides of dead volcanoes. To the north of the island, the jagged black walls of the continental shelf can be seen on a clear day, three hundred kilometres away across a forbidding polar sea.

House Vecum had a seat in Gudrun's Upper Legislature, but it had never been one of the most powerful or influential of Gudrun's noble families. Over the centuries, Maelificer had been sustained by the export of preserved fish, seabed ores, and by geothermic power, but it had always maintained a reputation as a seat of learning. In those steep, cliff-side towns, there flourished Shurfath Universitariate, two academies of rubrication, six museums, and four distinguished library collections, all thanks to the scholarly enthusiasms of the noble Vecums, amateur philologists all.

Now the last was dead, without issue, of terribly old age, and Maelificer was to be administered by the Vecum's mainland cousins in House Courel.

Bader Vecum's famous private library was to be broken up and dispersed into the discipline libraries of Shurfath, as well as several mainland scholams.

There had always been talk that House Vecum's private library contained some items of unusually esoteric merit and, as is often the case with old collections long held in private hands, the Inquisition had appointed an emissary to oversee the disbursement of its contents. One can never be too careful. Even without any malicious intent on the part of its owners, a thousand-year-old collection might have something pernicious festering at the back of a shelf. I have personally seen great tragedies unfold because of the unwitting ownership of the blasphemous.

I have seen a page of faded manuscript kill a world.

We gathered in the empty house, high on the steepest scarps of the island's peaks. It was the end of autumn, and the first ice was glinting in the harbour, the first dark, deep-ocean gales were building out in the west. Migratory birds mobbed the skies outside the high windows, preparing for departure. Servants hurried from draughty room to draughty room, nursing warmth out of the corroding heating systems that Bader Vecum had allowed to ail alongside his health.

Inquisitor Cyriaque led the symposium. With his interrogator, Voriet, and three savants, he had spent two months sifting the collection. He was now presenting his conclusions to a body of his peers from the ordos, along with an invited audience of academics, for deliberation. Eighteen volumes had already been sequestered without consultation. The Inquisition does not invite opinion on some matters. But there remained one hundred and fifty-one items where a strong argument could be made for careful academic study rather than strict prohibition. Chancellor Manivar of Shurfath was particularly insistent on this possibility.

'Shurfath's reputation,' he said, rising to his feet at the start of the symposium, 'which I may be so bold as to suggest extends beyond Gudrun and the subsector to the local Imperium Sector range, depends so much upon the quality of our collection. And that collection, at its core, has been the great work of House Vecum, whose broad and admirable curiosity has allowed them to accumulate a vast and irreplaceable archive of books down the ages. While we understand the necessity of restricting some volumes, from time to time, for the social good, we urge the worthy ordos not to sequester the entire catalogue. It is not all contaminated because of one or

two unwise inclusions. Please allow as much of the whole as possible to be transferred to the academic files of Shurfath and its fellow institutions at home and abroad.'

I was broadly in agreement with the chancellor's wishes. I had reviewed the questionable pieces, and there was nothing in them that warranted censorship. Depriving scholars of access to such material blunts our collective knowledge.

But, you may remark, I would say that, wouldn't I?

I also liked Shurfath. There was something about the cold, hard climate of Maelificer that focused scholarly intent. Some of the most learned members of the sector's ordos had studied there at one time or another: I myself had spent nine months there, trawling its stacks. That was many, many years previously, when I was attempting to do some background research on a matter that had occupied a colleague of mine during a visit to Elvara Cardinal. Though answers had eluded me (and the man was long since dead), I had come to appreciate Shurfath's atmosphere and learning.

Inquisitor Cyriaque leant towards the chancellor's way of thinking too, but he was young, and this was one of his first formal duties. He knew that the eyes of seniors were upon him. He could not afford to seem lenient. He could not afford to appear radical.

There's a potent word: *Radical*.

The first volume was brought out for examination and discussion, the first of the one hundred and fifty-one in question. It was going to be a long process. Cyriaque had chosen a small lecture room in the upper levels of the vertical palace, a gloomy, wood-panelled chamber of uninterrupted brown. It had once been used by medicae students for anatomy lessons, and there were tiers of seats around the central stage. The tiered gallery stalls, like a little box theatre, were almost as sheer as the cliffs outside. We leant on the wooden handrails and peered down into the gas-lit arena where Cyriaque's savants, their hands white-gloved, were laying the first questionable book on a piezo-charged neutralising cloth. Voriet, the interrogator, had placed aversive wards around the lip of the wooden stage. There were guards too: Inquisitorial servants in the stern robes of the ordos, and the more ostentatious men-at-arms of House Vecum.

Cyriaque began his review. The book was a copy of a copy of Unacius' *Readings*, one from which the notorious 'poetry' had long since been expunged. It was undoubtedly harmless, an unloaded gun. The mezzopict

illustrations were, however, charming and rare, and deserved to be held for the benefit of students of the visual arts. The chancellor rose and, once Cyriaque had finished his summary, said as much.

The ordos seniors seemed unmoved. Old Karnot Vesher would be, I knew well, monodominant to the end, hardline, bitter. Adrienne Corwal was harder to read. An elegant, diligent woman, she had her psyber drone hover over the pages as the savants turned them, relaying close-ups to her optic implants. Zaul Gaguach seemed bored. I distinctly heard him twice ask an aide what the palace kitchens were preparing for supper.

And then there was *him*, of course. Faceless, implacable, as unreadable as a blunt. It is not weakness to confess that I felt a certain emotional response when he moved from the shadows, onto the stage. It had been a very long time, and we had once been very close.

His career had been blighted by the affair of Slyte. His career, and the Kell Mountain region of Sarre Province. Gudrun, and Eustis Majoris too, bore the scars of his work.

I knew full well those modest scars were far preferable to the fatal exit wounds that would have been the consequence of his inaction, but Lord Grandmaster Rorken had been obliged to censure him. In the service of the Throne, and the Holy Ordos, he had been required to operate on a rogue status. He had saved, at a conservative estimate, trillions of lives. Even so, the aftermath had been a terrible mess. In order to continue in service with the Ordos Helican, he had agreed to suspend his active status and fulfil an advisory role in the Inquisition's headquarters.

A waste. A waste of a huge talent. At least, I had heard, he was writing again.

The *Readings* were finally passed for collation. *His* vote swung it, though his *aye* was the only word he uttered. I was glad to see that a fear of accusations of radicalism, a fear that he was the rogue they had always suspected, did not stay his hand. He knew what was right and what was foolishly wrong, and the mezzopicts belonged in a decent library.

The second work was brought out and introduced by Cyriaque. It was a 'tarnished' copy of an M.39 *Ennead*, where old, block-printing transposition errors had created quasi-blasphemous images of the Emperor.

I had honestly thought we would get all the way to item sixteen – a prayer pamphlet of the Technotic Sect that had a genuinely heretical tone – before there would be any real dissent or argument. That would probably

take up the whole of the first day. In one of the scheduled breaks, or perhaps after the evening session, I would steal my chance to talk to *him*.

But it didn't go anything like that.

As Cyriaque's savants turned the pages of the *Ennead* with their white-gloved hands, one of the House Vecum guardsmen at the back of the room, a tall fellow with a lugubrious expression, shifted uneasily. He was wearing a long green coat, a white sash, and copious gold braid, and his tall silver helm was festooned with the feathers of the oceanic greywing. He was holding a ceremonial poleaxe.

I noticed him twitch for a second time, and thought perhaps he was suffering from indigestion or other gastric discomfort. Then he hoisted the poleaxe and, with a slightly bemused frown, plunged it into the nearest ordos guard.

There was a prodigious quantity of blood. A major artery had been severed, and the force of blood pressure all but hosed the backs of the seniors on the stage.

The mess did not concern me much, nor the sudden commotion, the shouting, the movement, or the production of weapons. The poor house guardsman, already surprised at becoming a killer, was positively astonished to be killed. An outraged Inquisitorial agent drew down and shot him at point-blank range, and he fell backwards, releasing his grip on the haft of the poleaxe, which was still twitching in time with the ebbing arterial pulse.

My concern was the sense I had registered the moment before the killer struck. A tiny pulse of psychic power.

The house guardsman had been a puppet. A mind had used him. It had taken control of his limbs, and forced his action before he'd even had a chance to resist.

That was power. Worse, it was precision.

There is only one thing more dangerous than a human psyker. It is a human psyker expertly trained by the scholastica psykana.

I know. I am one.

The murderer's executioner, standing over the body with his sidearm drawn, suddenly became the next instrument of the invisible agency. He shivered. Then he turned and started to shoot, wildly, into the galleries and across the stage. One of the savants was cut down, and Cyriaque was hit in

the thigh. Guards – both ordos and house – who had rushed forward to help the first butchered victim and restrain his killer scattered.

Karnot Vesher was a psychic. Hurling himself out of his seat, the back of his coat soaked in blood, he yelled a command word at the shooter, who was one of his own retinue. The chilling use of *will* made me flinch. Vesher was strong, but his practice was clumsy. There was none of the stiletto finesse that had triggered the incident.

The guard with the gun ceased his rampage, impelled by Vesher's will. He halted, and looked down at the gun he was holding as if its presence in his hand was an utter mystery.

Confusion had dulled everyone's wits. The guard with the pistol, stunned to inaction by Vesher's yell, was no longer the problem. The rogue mind had flitted on, leaving one slave for another.

Another House Vecum guard, a captain, had dropped down beside the first victim, attempting in great earnest to ease the fellow's miserable death. The captain suddenly shivered, and wrenched the offending poleaxe out of the first victim's torso. He rose, a brimming lake of blood around him on the floor, and ran the brute weapon at Vesher as one might run down a boar.

The captain would have killed the inquisitor cleanly, but for two factors. Vesher used his will again, and screamed a frantic command of prohibition. The captain was too possessed by a superior mind for it to be fully effective, but it did make him hesitate, and his boots, decorated with velvet rosettes and brocade, slipped in the pooling blood.

Instead of impaling Karnot Vesher's chest, the spike of the poleaxe cracked through the inquisitor's left hip and pinned him to the wooden frame of the box gallery.

His outraged scream was as considerable as the quantity of blood that he began to leak. Around them, guards of both stripe opened fire, and cut the blameless captain down from several directions.

They were all idiots. The mind had already moved.

The galleries were emptying. Spectators, in great agitation, were fleeing to the comparative safety of the side rooms and the waiting chambers.

I knew it was time to withdraw. The bloodshed on the little galleried stage, which had taken on the ridiculous quality of some gruesome pantomime show, had been just that, a show. The majority of the most powerful and capable people at the symposium were on that stage, and the

attack had been designed to occupy them, to confuse them, to create a debacle that would entirely focus the attention of the audience.

Their demise had not been the primary intention, however. If one of the ordos seniors had been the target, why begin with the guard?

I was sure I was the true target.

Somehow, some agency had learned of my presence. I seldom frequented public or populated areas, but someone had found out about this one, rare appearance.

Where had I slipped up? How had I shown myself? For many years, I had lived other lives, covering all trace of myself. Where had I made a mistake? What fragment of truth had I left uncovered?

Was it simply my determination to meet with him here? Had that been my undoing?

Who was to blame? Who had come for me?

I have, I am sorry to reflect, accumulated far too many mortal enemies.

And I share the same Archenemy as the rest of my species.

I left the gallery, and took the small back stairs, a dark flight of wooden steps with a tight turn. I pushed my way past straggling spectators who were making for the exit. Some cried out as I pushed them aside, afraid that death was coming to touch them too.

I was armed with a power knife in a sprung sheath along my left forearm, and a Tronsvasse auto in a flat holster under my coat, but my most dangerous weapon was inside my skull.

I reached a lower hallway under the lecture room. The floors were boarded with gleaming black timber, and dressed with old rugs. The walls were lacquered panels. Dim, ancient faces peered out of ancient oil paint scenes in ancient frames. Refugees from the audience had accumulated in the hallway, huddled savants and frightened scholars. When they saw me, and read my grim sense of purpose, they shrank from me and fled.

My disguise – especially the uncanny ancient technology of the falsehood – was good enough to cover me under regular circumstances. Sitting, walking, standing, I was just another figure of no consequence. But now I was moving with speed, and no amount of borrowed finery and optic deception could cover my bulk and my oh-so-mechanical gait in rapid motion. I was clearly no academic. I was still a tall, broad-shouldered man, and what damage life has done to my solid frame, augmetics have repaired.

Servo-assist leg-frames become obvious when one is running, and no one could mistake the martial training evident in my bearing.

Vesher's brittle screams were still echoing from the lecture room above me. I believe that, by then, they were attempting to unpin his smashed pelvis from the panelling.

I felt the rogue mind flick across me, hunting for me, fixing on my psychic aura. I wrenched the auto from my concealed rig.

Just in time.

Shots came at me down the hallway, hard rounds. They drove into the wood panels like gas-gunned rivets, flecking the air with splinters. The scholars around me broke again, this time caught between my threatening form and the source of the gunfire.

More shots. Two of the scholars were hit as they milled in front of me, and crashed to the floor.

I brought the Tronsvasse up, still moving.

One shooter was half-concealed behind a golden helm and carapace displayed on a pedestal. I fired, missed, but made the attacker duck back into cover.

There was a second, concealed on the other side of the hallway. He was firing a large-calibre pistol. I saw the muzzle flash of the weapon as a bullet hissed past me, and aimed for that.

I think I hit him in the hand or forearm. I heard a yelp.

I used my will, and declared, 'Show yourselves!'

Though they were both being slaved by the rogue mind, my raw command was enough to make them falter and stumble out of cover for a moment.

Both were ordos guards, black-suited members of Gaguach's retinue. They were blameless and, like as not, would be free of control again in a moment. But I had not the luxury to show any mercy. Still running, I fired. Two shots, to the left, to the right. Each round struck the middle of a forehead and knocked a man on his back.

I had reached the end of the hallway. The door to a retiring room lay open to my right, and stairs were directly ahead. The scholars had all fled. I could still hear their cries of fright and panic from the staircase. I could still hear Vesher howling at a pain that would blight the rest of his life.

'Who are you?' I asked, reloading. 'Who are you? Where are you?'

+Who are *you*?+ a mind-voice answered. Cold, crisp. The sort of sharp voice a blade would use if it could speak.

I turned slowly, watching the doors and exits.

‘Who are you?’ I repeated, adding will to the words.

+Who are *you*? I did not expect you. You were not anticipated. Who are you? Reveal your name.+

The will-force in the send almost made me speak my name aloud, but I bit back. So I wasn’t the intended target after all. I was, in fact, the rogue element. The unexpected player in the game.

+I know you. I can smell your mind. The rogue. The famous pariah. Long years since your rosette carried any authority.+

The mind was strong. I pushed at it, harder, harder still. I knew the psyker was stronger than me, but sometimes strength isn’t everything. I was hoping to outflank it with skill and practiced technique, to wrong-foot it. The mind sounded young, not experienced enough to know every trick an old dog has in his book.

But it was hard to push, because the mind kept moving. There was a flexibility to the psionic pattern that was quite disturbing. It was fluid. It flitted, like a wild bird, from slave to slave, yet it did so with great purpose and accuracy. It was not simply ricocheting from one consciousness to the next.

It was fast. Strong and *fast*.

I pushed again. It slipped aside, but this time I came away holding some words torn off its elusive subconscious like a handful of grass.

Grael Ochre, the Yellow King.

‘Grael Ochre. Is that your name?’

No answer.

‘Yellow King... of what?’

No answer.

‘Yellow for cowardice? Won’t you reply?’

I pushed again.

‘What is Orpheus, Grael Ochre?’ I asked. ‘Why does that word lurk so brightly in your mind?’

The mind pushed back. Fire cored through the neural links of my augmetics, making me gasp and stagger to the wall for support. All my old wounds – all the artificial neurons spliced in to allow me to control my exo-

and endo-augmetics – shrieked with induced pain, the cellular memory of injury and surgical incisions replayed.

Clever, turning old pain against me. Getting me out of his head.

He was gone again. The house was alive with the sounds of shouting, of security teams rushing up and down the tight, wooden staircases. I limped into the retiring room, and pulled the door shut behind me. It was cold in there, unfriendly. No one had bothered heating it for the day. A limpid grey light fell through the tall windows. Drapes and tapestries hung dark like shrouds. There were shelves of books, some ragged furniture.

I needed to sit down. I tried to let go of the pain he'd poured into me. This Grael Ochre, whoever he was – and I was sure a name like that was just another mask, a *psydonym* – was cruel and exceptionally skilled. I had only stolen the few clues I had by brazen persistence and the fact that he had not expected another psyker to be in play at the symposium.

He had lit me up with old agonies: ghosts of all the wounds and traumas I had ever suffered, and not just the physical ones. I was almost overcome with a sense of loss, of several losses. Remembered grief. I saw faces, briefly, in my mind's eye. Faces I had not thought of in years. Uber Aemos, my long dead savant. The irrepressible Midas Betancore. Fischig, stubborn to the end. Tobias Maxilla and his gleaming artificial life. Alizebeth Bequin.

He woke them up. Grael Ochre woke them all up, and sent them to torment me for a minute or two until the pain ebbed away.

'Why are you here?'

I looked around sharply. He was right behind me. Perhaps he had taken shelter in the retiring room too, or perhaps he had been drawn to the flash of my mind. He was a dark shape, a shadow beside the seaward windows. It was as though he didn't want to be involved in anything.

'You recognise me?' I asked.

'Of course. Even with the falsehood, I had a suspicion. Is this anything to do with you? Today's little round of murder and puppet-play?'

'No,' I said. 'I thought someone might have been taking advantage of me making a public appearance, but that was arrogant. It's not me they're after. Does the name Grael Ochre mean anything?'

'No.'

'The Yellow King?'

'No.'

‘I see,’ I said. Was he ignorant, or was he just not playing? Throne knew, he had no reason to trust me. He hadn’t had for years.

I removed the falsehood so he could see my face. My scarred, expressionless face.

‘It is good to see you,’ I said.

His vox-speakers made a noise, perhaps the approximation of a sardonic laugh. I was not seeing him, and he was not seeing me. There was no expression, or even micro-expression, to read on my frozen face, and no nuance to prove that I genuinely was pleased.

And he was just the chair: the armoured, hard-machined, floating shape that stored and supported his helpless organic remains. He was seeing me through optical relays, and speaking via voxponder circuits. The armoured prow of his chair unit was no more readable than my features.

It looked as if he had not maintained the exterior of his chair in a long while. It was scarred and scratched, and the paint was flaking. He had not bothered to keep up its sinister appearance for field work.

Spots of fresh blood dappled one side of the chair’s armour.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked.

‘I came to see you.’

‘We have not seen each other for a very long time, Gregor. I had not expected ever to see you again.’

‘Times change,’ I replied.

‘So do people. Neither of us is what we used to be. Rogues, the pair of us.’

‘You were only rogue by circumstance,’ I said.

‘It cost me my career. And that implies you are *not* a rogue by circumstance. Are you really the radical they say you are? The *diabolus* threat that has five sectors looking for you?’

‘What I am is immaterial—’

‘Not so,’ he replied. ‘Even if you are innocent, this isn’t the time or place to prove it. Your reputation is accursed. You should not be here.’

‘I walk where I choose.’

‘Dark places, all of them.’

‘And I am not here to prove my innocence. I am here to see you.’

‘Which is why you should not be here at all,’ he said.

Gunfire echoed down through the house. Upstairs, another attempt was being made to smoke out or kill the psyker assassin.

‘You could stop that. You could crush him,’ I said.

‘No.’

‘You’re the strongest mind on the island.’

‘Once, perhaps.’

‘You won’t use your psy to restore order here?’

‘Others will. Gaguach and Corwal are closing the killer down. Another few minutes.’

‘Neither of them is strong enough.’

‘Together, they’ll do it.’

‘So you don’t use your mind anymore?’ I asked.

‘It was a condition of my pardon. The inquiry lasted fifteen years, Gregor. Molotch made a terrible mess.’

‘Not as terrible as the one he wanted to make. The one you stopped.’

‘I agreed to retire from active duty. I swore to suspend my mind from psychic activity. I merely use the little mind-impulse I need to control the chair and run life support. Nothing else. Nothing active. Not even telepathy.’

‘Why? The greatest mind of your generation.’

‘In a ruined body, with a shattered reputation. My mind and your body, there’s almost one whole person between us. Almost.’

I looked away. Even without the nuance of micro-expression on my part, he could tell he’d offended me.

‘Your skin is thinner these days,’ he said. ‘It was a joke, yet it cut you. You never used to care. Are you so ashamed of the path you’ve taken?’

I holstered my weapon and readjusted my falsehood.

‘I came to see you,’ I said. ‘I know it’s been a long time, but it was for something important. But I can see you’ve changed. There is no point bringing this to you.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’ll get over my disappointment.’

‘We cannot work together,’ he said. ‘We cannot be seen together, or have any association.’

‘Because I am a radical? *Diabolus*?’

‘Because I was given a choice after Molotch,’ he replied. ‘Retire from active service and refrain from psionics. Or, on behalf of the Holy Ordos, hunt down my old master, the heretic Gregor Eisenhorn.’

I did not know what to say. He had chosen the prison of his chair and the negation of his extraordinary consciousness over me.

‘This thing,’ he said, ‘this psyker that has come hunting in House Vecum today. I think it’s come for me. I made enemies. Molotch, Culzean, and their ilk, they had associates. They belonged to secret orders and clandestine frateries. Their kin want me dead. While I abstain from psionics, there is no satisfaction in killing me. They are goading me. It’s happened before. They are daring me to use my psy again. When I do, I will become a worthy target again. Then they will exact vengeance and kill me. I refuse to play their games and rise to it. This matter here, this Grael Ochre... it will be done soon. Calm will be restored. Go now, Gregor. Go now, before they lock the place down. You cannot be found here, for your own sake and for mine.’

I nodded. I turned.

‘Does the word Orpheus mean anything to you?’ he asked suddenly.

‘No,’ I said.

Another vox noise, the analogue of a sigh.

‘Then good-bye, Gregor,’ he said.

‘It really was good to see you, Gideon,’ I replied.

With a soft whir of suspensor mech, the chair turned to face the seaward windows. Ravenor was no longer looking at me.

‘I hope we never meet again,’ he said. His voxponder was toneless.

Covered by the falsehood, its resolution turned to maximum effect, I left the palace by the back staircase, and exited into the deep, hillside well of covered steps below the ramparts. An hour’s walk, down the steep black stairs that snaked down the windswept cliff, would bring me to the harbour road. From there, I could reach the boat-dock in the shadow of Shurfath Universitariate where my launch was hidden, and quit Maelificer.

Behind me, the sporadic sounds of gunfire continued to disturb the mountain air, and I could still feel a dangerous mind at large.

I hate running from a fight.

As it turns out, I wasn’t.

THE MAGOS

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*I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life.
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.*

– Religious verse, Terran, M2

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ONE

The Bone Coast

Sometimes, at night, the lights would wake him.

It didn't happen often. These days, there wasn't much traffic on the Bone Coast Highway. Cargo convoys, now and then; the occasional freight tanker, once in a while; perhaps a fast transit, purring up the coast road to Delci, or down to Tycho. By day, he'd glimpse the dirty sunlight winking off their hulls as they rattled past. He'd hear their engines and the thok-thok! of their heavy wheels on the highway's broken rockcrete. The sounds of other lives with places to go, rushing past him, Doppler-distorted.

At night, sometimes, passing lights backlit his window blinds and drifted across the ceiling of his little bedroom.

Very rarely, the passing lights slowed down, perhaps hoping his little roadside property was a tavern or machine shop. They'd speed up again as soon as they saw their mistake.

Rarest of all, they'd stop. If they knocked at his door to ask directions, Drusher would answer them as politely and helpfully as he could. He didn't know much. He hadn't had much direction of his own for a very long time.

Some didn't knock. He'd hear them outside, prowling around, trying doors and windows, boots crunching on the chalky gravel. Reavers, that was his guess, road-mobs. There were more of those these days, chancers and migrants from the lawless zones of the north. He'd hide in the back room, one hand on his gun, until they went away. He'd heard stories. He knew that, one day, they'd do more than just try the door.

They'd kick it down. They'd come in.

That night, he woke to lights on the tatty blinds. They drifted above him, right to left, across the water-stained ceiling. Something southbound.

It slowed, then was gone.

Drusher lay back on his lumpy pillow and sighed. He stared up at the blank darkness and found it no less fathomable than his life. He'd been dreaming of something, something better than this. He wondered whether, if he closed his eyes and willed it, he could find his place in the dream again and pick up where he left off.

The lights came back, left to right this time. They stopped. The same vehicle, reversing. He recognised the throbbing engine tone.

He got out of bed. He put on his old spectacles with shaking hands. He didn't know what to reach for first, his jacket or his anxiety meds. Then he remembered he'd been out of anxiety meds for three months. He pulled his jacket on over his nightshirt and pushed his feet into unlaced boots.

The lights went out. The engine died. That decided it for him. Anyone who pulled over to ask directions out here left their engine running.

There were no lights on inside his property. He fumbled in the blue gloom and found his way to the hall. He heard boots on the gravel outside: someone moving around, to the left of the front door, then the right, casing the place.

This was not how he wanted to die. In all honesty, he would have been pushed to make a list of ways he *did* want to die, but being beaten to a pulp in his own property by a foraging road-mob certainly wouldn't have been on it.

Drusher crept into the back room. He tried to remember where he'd left his gun. He didn't like guns, never had. It had sat on the dresser for a while, a paperweight for some ageing migration reports. But it had kept looking at him, so he'd put it in a drawer.

That was it, a drawer. Which drawer?

As quietly as he could, he looked in one, then another. He was on the third drawer when someone came to the door. He could see the front door from the back room. The shadow against the window lights was distressingly big.

The owner of the shadow knocked. Hard. The sound made Drusher jump. It took a big hard fist to make a big hard noise like that. He couldn't help but fancy he was hearing, for the first time, the very fist that would eventually beat the life out of him.

Idiot, he told himself. *That's it. Paralyse yourself with fear. With fancy.* Valentin Drusher's imagination was his worst enemy. He tried to remind

himself of that. He could imagine far worse and more horrible things than his imagination, but that kind of proved the point.

He found the gun. It was under a bundle of expired ration stamps, a broken clock and a coil of fishing wire. Of course it was. The ideal place. It was a small, chunky automatic, a Regit Arms .40 that Macks had given to him years ago. He had never, ever fired it.

Was it even loaded? She'd given him ammunition. Had he loaded it? If he hadn't, where was the box of ammunition? If he had, were the bullets still good? Did they... go off? Was that a thing?

He probably should have cleaned the weapon too, the way she'd taught him. It was probably so corroded it had seized solid.

Much like his life.

The shadow knocked a second time. Drusher started again. He steeled himself and decided to do the bravest thing he could think of.

He put the gun in his pocket and ran out of the back door.

The property was a pre-fab shack set back, a hundred metres or so, from the ragged coast highway. Drusher had lived in it for seven years. It was weather-worn and set on waste gravel, shrouded by bleached undergrowth and gnarled saltwood trees. From the front porch, by day, he could see the ocean, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing. To the rear, where the property backed into the dust dunes and the ridges of silt, were the coops and pens and outhouses. Everything got covered in a fine white dust blown in by the sea wind.

At night, it seemed a ghostly place, the white dunes silver against the low black sky. The air was still. It was a warm night, breathlessly warm. Even in winter, the Bone Coast was a thirsty place.

Drusher scuttled towards the outbuildings. Sweat was already dripping off him. He considered making a run for it, but there was nothing around for kilometres. The war, twenty or so years earlier, had scoured the Peninsula. The area around his home was a Throne-forsaken waste of bone-dry dunes, dotted ruins, inshore refineries, long since closed down, and the rusted carcasses of ATV carriers. The remoteness, and lack of amenities, were key reasons why the place had appealed to Drusher, and also key reasons why he'd been able to rent it for a manageable sum. He remembered the landlord, a property dealer in Tycho City, actually smiling with relief when Drusher had signed the lease and forked over the first quarter rent.

He decided to hide in the outbuildings, among the clutter. Most of the stuff had been there when he arrived. He'd added to it over time. Scavenging on the shore and inland had provided him with materials to use in various projects, the coops and pens for instance. Steel poles and wooden posts for frames, chain-link and mesh fencing to make the cages. Fuel cans hacksawed in half to make water troughs. There was some old sacking he used for windbreaks and lagging. He imagined himself under it, being very still.

He froze when he saw movement. A man appeared, walking around from the front of the property. He had a stablight in his hand and was playing it around. Drusher's eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He made the man to be young, slight of frame, fair-haired. Then the stab-beam pointed his way, and the glare ruined his night vision.

He ducked down, wincing, and crawled behind a pile of rotting cargo pallets. They had been going to be a lookout tower, a blind from which he could observe the winter migrations. But he'd never worked out how to engineer the old pallets into a platform that wouldn't collapse under him.

He heard the man call out. He heard footsteps on the chalky gravel. He dashed towards the pens and let himself in.

It was musty and dry inside. The air stank of birdlime, and there were feathers matted into the cage wire. His menagerie fluttered and warbled at his arrival. There were two *Tarkoni tarkonil* in the cage nearest the door, ailing creatures that he had found on his walks, one with a broken wing, the other matted with promethium. He was nursing them back to health, though he doubted either would ever be fit for release. Beside them, in the row of smaller cages, were various seabirds that had been grounded by a storm the previous winter, and seemed to have lost their migratory instincts. He'd fed them, and they'd stayed, pecking around the property, showing no signs of resuming their endogenous journeys. In his journal, he had written up each case, theorising that the electromagnetic fury of the storm had screwed up the magnetoceptive faculties that regulated their migratory behaviour. Either that, or it had caused some malfunction of the trigeminal system. They had lost the motivation to go on, and had forgotten why they were supposed to.

Sympathising acutely, he had taken them in.

In the end cage, beside the feed store, was the foul-tempered sea raptor, *Gortus gortus gershomi*. It hadn't been foul tempered when he found it. It

had been dead, hanging like a broken umbrella from a stretch of chain on the beach. It had tangled a foot in the wire, exhausted itself trying to flap free and died upside down, of thirst and starvation.

He'd taken it as a specimen, intending to mount the long wing feathers on an armature for study and reduce the carcass to bones for anatomical comparisons. Only when he had brought it back to his shack, and laid it on his work table, had he realised that a flicker of life remained. He had cleaned it and fed it by hand, using a pipette that, now he came to think of it, was definitely part of the cleaning kit Macks had given him for the gun.

As it regained strength, it did not express gratitude of any sort. Drusher had been disappointed, but not surprised. He was a magos biologists and knew from long experience that wild things remained wild, and would peck if he got too close. Setting aside his brief, foolish dream of a wise and saturnine companion who would perch around his home and watch him with cold eyes as he shuffled into old age, he had confined it to the cage, intending to release it when it was strong enough.

It was still there after six months. He had yet to work out a way of opening the cage to let it out without losing several fingers and his eyes.

Drusher stood in the pens, breathing hard. He heard the *tarkonils* chatter and flap, the seabirds yik with agitation, and the damn raptor clack its scissor beak with undisguised contempt.

He was as trapped as they were.

The man approached the pens. Drusher edged towards the feed store. The raptor bashed at the wire, snapping at him.

'Please be quiet,' he whispered to it, putting a shushing finger against his lips.

It glared at him with fathomless, jet-dot eyes and resumed its assault on the wire.

A light shone in. The door opened. Drusher saw the man silhouetted against the night.

'Show yourself!' the man called out. The stab-beam swung. 'Throne's sake! Are you in there? Are you hiding?'

The man took a step forwards. Drusher shrank back, his shoulders against the door of the feed store.

'Take w-what you want!' he cried. 'I don't have much, but just take it!'

He'd heard that if you allowed the road-mobs to pick you clean without arguing, sometimes they let you live.

‘I don’t want anything,’ the man replied. He sounded surprised. The stab-beam found Drusher’s cowering, flinching face. ‘I’ve come for you.’

Well, that was it, then. He was done for. Might as well just string him up from a fence by one foot like a broken umbrella.

At least he knew, now. At least he knew all hope was gone. It gave him an odd sort of strength, a resolve that he’d only managed to summon a couple of times before in his entire life. There was nowhere left to go. His back was against the wall. Well, literally, the door of the feed store, but metaphorically a wall, unyielding. He was cornered, trapped.

As on those previous occasions, the sudden resolve unlocked something in him. A will to live, an anger towards the world that thwarted and frustrated him at every last damn turn.

He wrenched open the clasp of the end cage. The sea raptor came out like a summoned fury in a blizzard of feathers. Keening, it went for the light and the open door.

The man in the doorway yelled out in alarm. The raptor hit him, pecking and raking. He yelped, covered his face and tried to fight it off. Its wings slammed at him. He lost his footing and fell sideways, the back of his head bouncing off the doorframe.

The raptor burst past, up into the night air, wings wide.

A second later, Valentin Drusher followed it out of the pens with equal determination, leaping over the body of the man sprawled in the doorway. He saw the raptor high above, its powerful white-fledged wings beating as it banked towards the sea. He felt as if he were flying too, flying free, leaving the horror of the world behind and soaring high into—

Something hit him across the mouth and clothes-lined him onto his back. The impact knocked his spectacles off. He was stunned for a moment, his head spinning, his mouth full of blood.

Another man was standing over him. He was very big, the owner of the shadow at the door. Drusher groped around, found his spectacles and jammed them back on. They were bent, but he could see the man. He was wearing a jack-armoured coat. His head was shaved, rounded and solid like the tip of a large-calibre bullet. He had a goatee.

He looked down at Drusher, baffled.

‘The hell you playing at?’ he asked.

‘Don’t kill me!’ Drusher gurgled.

‘I’m not going to,’ the man replied.

Drusher wrenched out the pistol and aimed it at the man's face.

'Do not kill me!' he cried.

The man looked at the gun in annoyance.

'Well, *now* I want to,' he said.

Stab-beams bobbed behind him. More people, running over.

'Have you found him?' a voice asked.

'I found someone,' said the bald man, frowning at Drusher. 'He's got a gun.'

'And I'll use it!' Drusher yelled, lying on his back and brandishing the weapon wildly.

The bald man sighed and, in some manner that Drusher couldn't quite understand but which clearly involved terrifying reflexes, took the gun out of Drusher's hand.

'Now he hasn't,' the bald man called out.

The other figures arrived. They shone their stablights at him.

'Is that him?' the bald man asked.

'Yes,' said one of the figures. A woman. 'Valentin Drusher. Magos biologists.'

'He doesn't look like a magos biologist,' said the bald man. 'Just some old loon. Why isn't he wearing any trousers?'

'I was in bed!' Drusher wailed.

'With your boots on?' the bald man asked.

'That was after!' cried Drusher.

The woman bent down beside Drusher.

'Get up and stop making a fuss, Valentin,' she said. 'These nice people have come a long way to find you.'

Drusher knew her voice. After fifteen years, he still knew the smell of her too. Body heat, leather, a faint fragrance called *True Heart* that had cost him too much money in a Tycho city perfumery twenty years before.

'Macks?'

'Hello, Drusher,' said Germaine Macks. 'It's been a while.'



TWO

A Specific Area of Technical Expertise

There were four of them. Macks and three others, two men and a woman.

‘I made you this,’ the other woman said. She put a tin mug down on the table beside Drusher.

She was a finely made woman with very dark skin, her hair tight-pinned around her head. Drusher could not guess her age. Thirty, perhaps? She wore gloves and an embroidered cerise jacket.

‘What is it?’ Drusher asked, dabbing at his split lip.

‘Caffeine,’ she said.

‘I don’t have any caffeine,’ he replied.

The woman frowned and gestured towards the kitchen. ‘Brown powder. Silver tin. Second shelf. Marked “Caffeine”.’

‘A sample of desiccated treefox droppings, for analysis,’ said Drusher.

She nodded thoughtfully, then shrugged.

‘Probably better not drink it, then,’ she advised.

They had brought him inside and allowed him to get dressed. The bald man had not given him back his gun. Drusher’s mouth, jaw and neck hurt from the blow that had knocked him down. He was fiddling with his spectacles, but the frames were still bent. No one had even said sorry.

Macks came in, pulled out the other chair and sat facing Drusher. He hadn’t seen her in fifteen years. Her short hair was just beginning to lose its depth of colour, but she still looked good. He could see the tiny zigzag scar above the left-hand side of her mouth, and the trace of the other scar on her forehead. Both were old now, faded, like memories. She wore the uniform of a Magistratum marshal. Beside her, he felt ancient.

‘I heard you retired,’ he said.

‘Didn’t suit me,’ she said. ‘The division was understaffed so I took reassignment.’

‘Tycho City?’

She shook her head.

‘Unkara Province. Up north.’

He nodded, as if that meant something.

‘Still a silly bastard, I see,’ she said. ‘When someone knocks on your door, you don’t run away and attack them with eagles.’

‘You do out here,’ said Drusher.

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Why are you living like this, Valentin? In this dump. Alone.’

‘Well, odd as it may sound, there is very little in the way of paid work available for a highly qualified magos biologists on Gershom,’ he said. ‘A fact that I have wrestled with for, let me see now, thirty-four years, and a detail I wish I had been aware of when, as a young man with splendid prospects, I took the commission to do a survey of the planet’s indigenous fauna, and ended up stuck here for the rest of my—’

‘Don’t start,’ she said.

He opened his mouth to carry on, but saw the look on her face. It was a self-pitying rant she’d heard from him too many times. He cleared his throat.

‘It also appears from experience,’ he said, less emphatically, ‘that I do not make for sparkling company, and so an isolated existence is better for everyone. Someone once told me I’d be happier alone. Or that I’d make others happier if I *was* alone. I don’t recall precisely. There was a lot of shouting and door-slamming.’

Macks sighed and looked away.

‘Did you train that eagle?’

Drusher glanced around. The younger, blond man was sitting on a bench in the corner. He was holding a dressing to the gashes on his cheek and neck.

‘It was a sea raptor,’ said Drusher.

‘What?’ asked the blond man.

‘A sea raptor. Not an eagle. *Gortus gortus gershomi*.’

‘Uh-huh,’ said the man. ‘I asked if you trained it.’

‘No.’

‘Then... a control implant of some kind?’

‘No.’

‘Is he psykana?’ asked the bald man. He was suddenly standing in the doorway behind Drusher.

‘No, he’s not,’ said Macks.

‘Good,’ said the bald man, ‘because, you know—’

‘I let a wild thing out, and you were in the way,’ said Drusher to the younger, blond man.

‘Ah, but you *knew* Voriet was in the way,’ said the bald man, ‘and you knew what would happen.’

‘Yes,’ said Drusher. He hesitated, then looked over at the blond man.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

Voriet shrugged.

‘It’s fine,’ he replied. ‘It was smart thinking, actually.’

‘Yeah,’ growled the bald man. ‘If we’d been a road-mob, you’d have eagled the *crap* out of us.’

‘What is this about?’ Drusher asked. He was looking directly at Macks, the only person in the room he felt he could consider a friend, and even then, not much of one. ‘Who are these people?’

The blond man got to his feet. With his free hand, he took out a rosette and showed it to Drusher.

‘Interrogator Darra Voriet, Ordo Hereticus,’ he said. ‘These are my associates Medea Betancore and Harlon Nayl.’

Valentin Drusher didn’t hear much beyond the word ‘ordo’. It felt as though a trapdoor had opened under him and plunged him into a world where there would never, ever be enough anxiety meds.

‘We have need of assistance,’ said Nayl, the big bald man. ‘A specific area of technical expertise. You came highly recommended.’

‘By the marshal, I presume?’ asked Drusher, wiping his lips. Macks had produced a hip flask of amasec and let Drusher take a swig to steady his nerves.

‘Yes,’ said Voriet.

‘I don’t do consultations,’ said Drusher.

‘What are you, retired?’ sneered Nayl. ‘Living in your beachfront property, training eagles?’

‘N-no—’

‘I think I just heard you complaining there were piss-all opportunities for employment here on Gershom,’ said Nayl.

‘Does this pay?’ asked Drusher.

‘Yes,’ said Nayl, ‘in the form of deep satisfaction, and pride at having served the Emperor of Mankind and His Inquisition.’

‘I thought so,’ said Drusher.

‘There’s a stipend, and expenses,’ said Voriet.

‘Is there?’

‘Maybe,’ said Nayl. ‘Name a fee. Bear in mind you’re labouring under the false impression that you have any choice in this. The Inquisition needs your help. It’s not a yes/no option.’

Drusher looked across the table at Macks. Panic was beginning to set in.

‘Why did you bring these people here?’ he hissed. ‘What have you got me into? Why are you doing this to me *again*?’

‘They need a magos biologis, Valentin,’ she said.

‘Well, they can find someone else,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m not going to get dragged into another one of your insane adventures.’

‘Come on, Valentin. Outer Udar was fun. And Tycho City? We went to the zoo.’

‘So you have history?’ asked Medea Betancore.

‘We do,’ said Macks. ‘Which is why I brought you to him.’

‘A history of “insane adventures”?’ said Betancore. ‘In, what was it... Outer Udar and—’

‘It’s possible he was referring to the three years we were married,’ said Macks.

Nayl snorted.

‘It’s not funny,’ said Drusher.

‘I am absolutely certain it wasn’t,’ said Nayl, ‘for her.’

Drusher got up and tried to appear dignified.

‘Look, sir,’ he said. ‘I am a magos biologis. I study flora and fauna. Make taxonomies. I have been here on Gershom for more than thirty years. I wish I hadn’t been, but there you go. It’s not much of a life, however it’s what I do. Twice, in the past, Marshal Macks has co-opted my assistance in certain matters. The last time was twenty years ago. They were dangerous experiences, very much outside my wheelhouse. I do not wish to repeat them. Ever. So I suggest you look for somebody more qualified to help with... whatever it is you’re doing.’

‘Thing is,’ said Nayl, ‘there’s *no one* more qualified. Not in this system. No one else even *qualified*, period. You’re the only magos biologis.

Marshal Macks didn't recommend you because she thought you were particularly good. She recommended you because you were the only magos biologis she knew.'

Drusher sat down again.

Macks looked at Nayl sharply.

'You really didn't have to tell him that,' she said.

Nayl shrugged.

'I know what he's like,' Macks went on. 'He'll mope now. Sulk. We'll never get him to cooperate.'

'Wow,' murmured Drusher. 'You're making it better *all* the time.'

'I'll make him cooperate,' said Nayl.

Betancore raised a gloved hand.

'First of all,' she said, 'we're on a clock. He's waiting for us. I don't want to keep him waiting much longer, do you? And I'd rather we brought this gentleman along in a cooperative frame of mind than drag him unwillingly. So there must be something he wants, something that will make it worthwhile for him.'

'He wants to get off this planet,' said Macks.

Drusher looked at her. She was serious.

'He's wanted nothing more since the day I met him. One-way passage.'

'Where do you want to go?' asked Voriet.

Drusher swallowed hard.

'Anywhere,' he said quietly. 'Anywhere that isn't here.'

Voriet looked at Betancore. 'We can do that. Get him somewhere. Gudrun. Thracian Primaris...'

'You'd... pay for a travel bond?' asked Drusher.

'We've got a ship,' said Betancore.

Drusher began packing some belongings in an old Munitorum kitbag. His house was full of clutter, but when it came down to it, there were very few items he felt he had to take: his journals, the manuscript of his taxonomy, his sketchbooks. He wasn't sure any of that even mattered, but he felt obliged to take them; something to show he hadn't entirely wasted the previous thirty-four years.

'What is the issue?' he asked Nayl.

'Wildlife problem. Up north. Unkara Province.'

'And the work involves?'

'Insane adventures. You won't like it.'

‘I will be resolved. I *can* be resolved, you know.’

‘When the offer is right,’ said Nayl.

Drusher stiffened.

‘I’m not a mercenary,’ he said.

Nayl shrugged.

‘I am,’ he replied.

He looked at Drusher.

‘Just to be fair,’ he said, ‘you say you’ve had insane adventures.’

‘I have.’

‘I’m sure. I’m also sure that whatever escapades you and the marshal have enjoyed in the past... they’re nothing. Nothing compared to what we do.’

‘You underestimate what—’

‘No,’ said Nayl.

‘Then you’re boasting.’

‘Not that either. I’m just trying to tell it to you straight. In all fairness. This isn’t going to be like anything you’ve known before.’

‘It must be like something I’ve known, sir,’ said Drusher, ‘or you wouldn’t need my expertise.’

Nayl thought about that.

‘Well, you know animals,’ he admitted. ‘You know how to let a wild thing out of a cage, and what will happen when you do. This is going to be like that, only in reverse.’

‘Putting something back in a cage?’

‘Mmm-hmm. We’ll do the heavy graft. We just need expertise. Identification. Insight. That sort of thing.’

Drusher fastened the kitbag.

‘Ready?’ Nayl asked.

‘Yes,’ said Drusher. He paused. ‘No, wait. Cages. You reminded me. I’ll be right back. Two minutes.’

He went outside, to the back of the property. It was nearly dawn. The sky had turned mauve over the white dunes. It almost looked beautiful. *Typical*, Drusher thought. *Now that I’m finally leaving...*

He went to the pens and opened the cages one by one, shooing out the *tarkonils* and the seabirds. He couldn’t leave them caged up and not come back. He threw down some feed for them, and they started to peck, strutting around the little yard warily.

They'd have to fend for themselves. It wasn't kind, but it was kinder than leaving them penned up to starve.

He looked at the property. He wasn't coming back. He wouldn't miss it.

He realised he was being watched.

The sea raptor was perched on a fence strut at the top of the dunes. It should have been down the coast by now, or out to sea, but there it was, watching him.

Drusher took off his spectacles, cleaned the lenses on the hem of his shirt so he could see better, and put them back on.

The sea raptor ruffled its wings, then spread them and powered down in one long swoop, landing on the ridge of the pens above him. It clacked its proud beak.

Drusher smiled.

'So all those months of being a bastard,' he said to it softly, 'and you wanted to stay after all? You could have sat on the back of my chair at night, watched me work... Go on, now. You're free.'

The raptor tilted its head and studied him.

'Go on,' he said. 'I'm going. You can go too. But thanks for seeing me off and everything.'

The raptor tilted its head the other way and opened its beak. He could see the sharp spear of its tongue. Such a majestic creature, so—

It stooped from the roof ridge into the yard, killed one of the pecking *tarkonils* outright, and took off with it in its talons. He watched it fly away into the dawn sky, lugging the limp prey with hefty beats of its wings.

A few *tarkonil* feathers drifted in the air around Drusher like snowflakes.

'Typical,' Drusher said.

'Who are you talking to?' asked Macks, stepping through the back door.

'Myself,' said Drusher.

'Ready?'

'I'm supposed to be a magos biologis, Germaine, but every day I realise I know nothing about anything. You sure you want me for this?'

'Not really,' she said, 'but we're going anyway.'



THREE

Helter Fortress

Several roads converged in Unkara Town – the highways from the Peninsula to the south and the western routes through to Ottun and the ocean – and the least of them, a track, wound north into the hills for ten kilometres until it found the fortress.

The hills were not hills. They had earned that insufficient title in ages past, because they were a four hundred kilometre spur of the Tartred Range, and all peaks on Gershom were hills compared to those monsters.

They towered in their own right: younger mountains, sharp-edged, clothed in evergreen forests below their shoulders, sweeping up into spires of naked dark granite. They were called the Unkaran Hills, known too as the Karanines, and they formed the northern and eastern limits of the province. Their older, glowering cousins, the Tartreds, could be seen, from high ground on a clear day, as a blue shadow two hundred kilometres away, like the front wave of a great deluge, frozen solid and forever about to roll in and sweep the province away.

The history of the territory had been fraught. It had evaded Gershom's recent conflicts, including the long and complex civil war that had ravaged the Peninsula, spared by its outlying state and lack of significance. But the fortresses that clung to the long spur of the hills spoke of older disputes. Outer Udar lay to the east of the Tartreds' flanks, and in the early days of settlement, its territories had bred fierce nomadic peoples with an expansionist mindset. Long, ungainly wars of invasion and repulsion had haunted the Karanine belt.

No one studied them any more. The deeds and efforts of those wars were remembered only by the pages of history texts that slept on the library shelves of Unkara Town, and were never opened. The sites of skirmishes

and battles were lost in the woodland slopes and valleys, so overgrown and misplaced that even their particular significances and causes had vanished. Occasionally, a farmer, grazing high pasture, or a woodsman in the deeper forest, would stumble on a rusted buckle or spear tip, or a piece of bone that was not an animal's, and realise that something had once happened in that empty place.

Only the fortresses remained as any kind of memorial to an age of conflict. Raised in the dark granite of the Karanines, they had taken longer to fade into nature. Most were gone: heaps of stone scattered on lonely hillsides; stumps of wall, furred with moss, lingering in forest twilight.

Some had endured. Talla Keep, far to the west of Unkara Town, was a ruin, but its architecture was so cyclopean and its prospects so magnificent, it had enjoyed a romantic afterlife as a site for visitors, hunters, recreational walkers and a few amateur historians. Korlok Fort, another ruin, was less accessible, but it had survived in a local children's rhyme, and in the name of two hostelries in the town.

Helter Fortress was the most complete. It was the closest of all the fortresses to the town, and for the two centuries following its duties as a stronghold, it had served as the home of the Karanine Proctors, then as the summer retreat of the provincial governor, and finally as the estate of a local dignitary called Esic Fargul, who had retired there to enjoy the rewards of a successful career in the timber industry.

Fargul's wealth had run out five years before his health. Helter sank into neglect, and the old man died there, alone, in a draughty bedchamber on the fifth floor of the tower.

Helter Fortress was shut up at his passing. Its windows were boarded over, its gates chained, and weeds took up residence. No one had lived there, or even visited, for thirty years.



FOUR

Heuristic Amplification Disciplines

Garofar found Audla Jaff where he had left her in the old man's library. She was still reading, but he noticed it was a different book from the one she had been intent on an hour earlier.

An early rain had come up after dawn. Garofar could hear it pattering at the plastek sheeting they'd taped across Helter's broken windows, and tapping at what glass remained. There were wooden shutters, but Jaff had opened them for light, despite the glow-globes she had set around her perch on the ratty old chaise.

It had been two weeks since he'd met her, and he still didn't know what to make of her: elfin, with a frame like a boy, and a high forehead that made the curve of her brow seem huge, and very young, younger than him. She was smart, he knew that. Big eyes, like new coins, a tiny pinched mouth. He understood she was some kind of expert retained by the visitor. With the visitor absent, she was in charge.

He stood for a moment, feeling awkward, rain dripping off the leather-jack of his deputy's uniform.

'I've done a sweep,' he said.

'Are your colleagues on station?' she asked. She didn't look up. She turned a page.

'Yes, mam,' he said. He thought of Cronyl, sheltering from the rain in the gatehouse, and Edde, walking the west wall with her riotgun under her slicker.

'Any... any word from him?' he asked.

She closed the book and picked up another from a pile beside her.

'No,' she said.

'You don't think... something might have...'

‘No,’ she said. She was intent on the book. ‘It’s possible that something has, of course, but I doubt it. He knows what he’s doing. Is there any sign of the others?’

He shook his head.

‘Did you check the cold store?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he said.

She raised her head and looked at him. The slightest hint of a question.

‘You’re reading, mam,’ he said, changing the subject.

‘I am,’ she said, looking right at him.

‘A book.’

Jaff looked down at the book in her hands and reacted as if surprised to see it there. Garofar had noticed her sense of humour before. It was at odds with her serene, cerebral manner. It seemed older than she was.

‘I am,’ she said.

‘Anything in particular?’ he asked.

‘This?’ she asked, gesturing with the book, a slim volume. ‘*Folk Verse of the Karanine Passes* by Nettial Farell, second edition, published by the Red Grange Press in Delci seventy-eight years ago, some water-marking, foxing and shelfwear, inscribed on the flyleaf “To my dear nephew Esic, your beloved aunt”.’

She rolled off the details rapidly without even consulting the book.

‘Good, is it?’ he asked.

Jaff rose to her feet, unfolding her legs from under her. She was significantly shorter than him.

‘You have a tell, Deputy Garofar.’

‘A tell?’

‘Several. In this case, a slight twitch of the masseteric ligament on the left side. A micro-expression that indicates annoyance or aggravation. You wonder why I am reading and not working. You ask if the book is good, when what you want to ask is why it’s you who has to do the patrol sweep in the rain. The answer to your un-vocalised question is that I am researching. I am not reading for recreation. I am investigating Esic Fargul’s library, or at least those parts of it that have not been reduced to pulp by damp and insect activity.’

Garofar glanced around the library. It had to hold upwards of ten thousand books.

‘You... pick books at random?’

‘No, I am working methodically.’

Garofar couldn’t hide a laugh.

‘You’re reading them all? The entire library?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good luck with that, mam,’ he smiled. ‘I guess you’ll be here a few years after we’ve all gone.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, to read all the books... I mean...’

‘I have one hundred and seventeen more to go,’ she said.

‘You’re joking,’ he said.

‘I must be,’ she said with a flash of raised eyebrows.

‘You can’t have read... I mean... We’ve been here a couple of weeks.’

She put the book down.

‘You really don’t know what a savant is, do you, deputy?’

Garofar thought he did, but clearly he didn’t.

‘You could explain,’ he suggested.

‘Do you know what the Heuristic Amplification Disciplines of the Neo-Distaff Institute are?’ she asked.

‘I do not, mam.’

‘Then a direct explanation will be ineffective. Do you know what a sponge is?’

‘Yes,’ he replied tightly.

‘Then I am a sponge, and data is water.’

‘I see,’ he said.

‘Do you know what a metaphor is, deputy?’

‘I do, mam.’

‘And according to your masseteric ligament, you know what condescension is too. So I apologise for that. Now, let’s discuss your lateral cheek septum.’

‘My...?’

‘Your other tell, deputy,’ said Jaff. ‘A micro-twitch. When I mentioned the cold store, you lied. You didn’t check it.’

Garofar sighed.

‘No, mam. I... I know I should have. But it’s a waste of time. All those bodies. I mean, they’re not going anywhere...’

‘Can you say that with certainty, deputy?’ she asked.

Garofar didn't reply. He heard the rain pattering on the plastek sheeting. He felt cold, colder than he should have, even in the damp, draughty room, half open to the Karanine weather. It had sounded like a pretty interesting assignment when Macks had put him on it. A major case: murders, killings, the talk of Unkara Town, the idea that external investigators had arrived. No one had outrightly said so, but Garofar was pretty sure they were connected to the ordos – big stuff, the sort of thing that didn't happen in a backwater province, the sort of thing that could get an ambitious junior officer noticed, and maybe lead to advancement, because opportunities in the Karanines were scarce, especially when the marshal showed zero signs of ever wanting to retire, like she should have done years ago, and make way for new blood...

But it had turned out to be much less comfortable. Cold, wet, tedious, yet with a constant undercurrent of something Garofar felt was malevolent, like a storm waiting to break. It wasn't the bodies. He'd seen plenty of bodies: accidents, bar fights, farming mishaps, plus a brief tour in the local militia during the last years of the civil war, before he joined law enforcement. Bodies didn't faze him, though the number and the manner of death in this case was unusual. What unsettled him was something he couldn't put his finger on, like they were poking at something that shouldn't be poked, or opening a cage that had been locked for a damn good reason. And that lead investigator was a piece of work. Scary as hell in his own right. If it had been up to Garofar, the lead investigator would have made it onto the list of suspects, just turning up in town like that, with his cruel manner and his band of disreputable henchmen.

But it wasn't up to Garofar. Hadeed Garofar was just a deputy with an assistant investigator's ticket. He was local enforcement. He was muscle. He did as he was told.

'Let's check the cold store together,' said Jaff. 'I want to take some ambient measurements anyway.'

'Yes, mam. Good,' he said. 'Measurements of ambient what?'

'Just ambient,' she replied. She buttoned her coat. Then she looked at him.

'I hear an engine,' she said, 'approaching.'

'The others must be back, mam,' he replied.

'Hmm. If they are, they've changed vehicle.'

'How can you tell?' he asked.

‘It sounds different,’ she said.

Deputy Cronyl had opened the gates to let the transporter enter the yard. He stood watching, his riotgun hooked over the crook of his arm as it came to a halt. Deputy Edde had appeared on the top wall to add cover.

The transporter was a cargo-4, an all-terrain variant, spattered in mud from the forest track. It pulled up beside the green ATV and the heavy, bronze Marshal Division transporter already parked there.

Garofar followed Audla Jaff into the yard.

The hatches popped on the cargo 4, and five people got out. Garofar’s boss, Macks, and three of the investigator’s team: the suave Voriet, the big thug Nayl and Mamzel Betancore, whose beauty stopped Garofar in his tracks every time he saw her.

It looked like someone had taken a swing at Voriet. There was a dressing strapped around his face. That pleased Garofar no end. Voriet was an arrogant bastard. He was of a type Garofar knew too well: privately schooled cadet officers in the Territorial Guard, petulant aristos, privileged rich kids from the cities, who rolled into Unkara every summer season to hunt and drink and sail the lakes, and generally harass any female they could find. They had rich fathers who retained expensive lawyers who, in turn, could disappear any indiscretions.

The fifth man looked like a vagrant. He was old and pale, and thin to the point of being haggard. His hair was grey, and he wore a shabby chequered suit and an overcoat that had outlived several previous owners. Little wire-frame spectacles perched on his face. The frames were bent, and they gave him a cock-eyed appearance. This was the expert they’d gone off to locate?

‘Morning, chief,’ Garofar called to Macks.

She nodded back. She was handing down a kitbag that was apparently the extent of the expert’s luggage. The expert was standing nearby, adjusting his spectacles and looking around as if he’d never seen daylight or old high walls before.

‘Garofar, this is Magos Biologis Drusher,’ Macks said.

‘Sir,’ Garofar nodded curtly.

‘Find him a room and give him a hand with his bag. We’ll brief in twenty minutes.’

‘Yes, mam,’ said Garofar. He picked up the kitbag. ‘Fifth floor is free,’ he said.

Macks shook her head.

‘Stick him on the fourth, near to me. If you put him on the fifth, someone will tell a ghost story about the old man dying up there and we’ll never hear the bloody end of it.’

The expert, Drusher, scowled at her.

‘I’m not a child, Macks,’ he said. ‘I don’t believe in ghosts. An old building where someone once died? So what?’

‘I know what you can get like, Valentin,’ she replied.

‘I presume the bedding has been changed since this old man died in it?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘Stick him on the fifth, then, deputy,’ she said.

‘You were gone a long time,’ Jaff said to Voriet.

‘Delayed,’ Voriet replied. ‘The transporter broke down outside Ottofan. Transaxle. We had to rent another ride.’

Jaff looked at Garofar and flashed her eyebrows again. Scary bitch. How could she tell that just from a distant noise?

‘Brief in twenty,’ Macks repeated. ‘Is he here?’

‘No,’ said Jaff.

‘You could have briefed me on the road,’ said Drusher. ‘It was a long enough journey.’

‘Some things you need to see for yourself before they make sense,’ said Nayl.

Garofar led Drusher up to the fifth floor.

‘Old place,’ Drusher remarked.

‘Yes.’

‘Unoccupied?’

‘Before us, yeah, for years.’

‘Nice views,’ said Drusher, pausing to look out of one of the window slits.

‘I suppose.’

‘I bet you get a lot of hill-browns up here. Pine finch. Crosshammers. Goldhawks. And lots of charhoops in autumn.’

‘I couldn’t say,’ said Garofar.

Drusher shrugged and continued climbing the stairs after him.

‘What happened to Voriet’s face?’ Garofar asked.

‘I attacked him with an eagle,’ said Drusher.

Garofar stopped.

‘Really?’ he asked.

‘Not really,’ Drusher replied, ‘but that appears to have become the narrative, despite my attempts to correct it, so I’m just going along with it.’

The flaking stone steps led up to a landing where the floor was boarded with wood. It had once been polished, a fine surface, but water damage from the leaking roof had stained it, making it patchy and rough. Buckets and other open vessels had been set at strategic points to catch drips. Some were so full, puddles were spreading around them.

‘Along here,’ said the deputy. ‘Mind your step.’

‘They haven’t told me much,’ said Drusher.

‘About what?’

‘About anything. This matter. This case. This investigation.’

Garofar looked at him.

‘I get the feeling a lot of it’s classified, sir,’ he said.

‘You don’t know?’ asked Drusher.

‘I’m just local law, sir,’ he said. ‘Staffing, support, you know.’

‘So it’s classified by the ordos, then?’ asked Drusher, more to himself.

Deputy Garofar’s manner suddenly became keen. He looked Drusher in the eye.

‘So they *are* from the ordos?’ he asked. ‘Inquisition?’

Drusher nodded.

‘Yes. I saw a badge. Voriet identified himself. Didn’t you know?’

‘No,’ replied Garofar. ‘They don’t say much about anything. The marshal was already investigating this case when they sort of turned up and took over. She’s cooperating. It’s not like her to just roll over. It feels like they have something on her.’

‘Not Macks,’ said Drusher.

‘You know her?’

‘From way back.’

‘Well, I suppose if they are from the ordos, that would explain her compliance,’ said Garofar, ‘her eagerness to assist. I mean, that’s how it works, doesn’t it? The Inquisition has authority everywhere.’

‘As I understand it. What was the case?’

‘Sir?’

‘The case Marshal Macks was investigating?’ asked Drusher.

Garofar hesitated.

‘Oh, come on, Deputy... Garofar,’ said Drusher, pausing slightly to squint and read the officer’s name badge. ‘I let slip they were from the ordos. It’s your turn. Like you said, they’re playing it close. Even my old friend Macks.’

Garofar shrugged.

‘There was a death. Last winter. A farmer found the body. Open and closed, really, or should have been. Ursid kill.’

‘*Ursa minora gershomi*?’ said Drusher. ‘Or *majora*, I suppose? Or even a cave ursid, though those are rare these days?’

‘Sir?’

‘A banded ursid, or a big grey?’

‘Yeah, we get both kinds up here. The king greys once in a while. So, we thought, some poor idiot left the wood path, got taken. Never got an identification on the victim, though. No papers. We ran genetic samples through the system, and even shared them with other networks. Then in the spring, there were two more. Same deal.’

‘Found together?’

‘No,’ said Garofar. ‘Kilometres apart. Within days, another, then another a month after.’

‘Five. All male?’

‘No. Four male, one female.’

‘All unidentified?’

‘Yeah, which is odd. We get a lot of visitors up here in season. Hunters and the like. Plus, nice views, like you said. So people from outside the province aren’t unusual. But five unknowns? That’s starting to feel off.’

‘Was there feeding? They were all ursid kills.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Garofar. ‘All the meat was gone. All the organs. Funny, that’s the first question the marshal asked.’

Drusher smiled.

‘She remembered the basics,’ he said.

‘She wanted it squared away, certainly. I mean, we get the odd animal attack. But five felt like there might be a rogue beast. Plus, the identification thing. Macks, she ordered up some expensive facial reconstruction on three of the bodies, then we ran the results around every hostelry, tavern and guest house in the area. I mean, it was possible we had five dead visitors who all happened not to have papers on them, or who had their papers eaten along with them.’

‘Unlikely,’ said Drusher.

‘But possible. No point seeing patterns where there aren’t any. But nothing. No one recognised them. So the reconstructs went out on the wire too.’

‘And that brought the ordos in?’

‘Yes,’ said Garofar. ‘But before they got here, we found the rest.’

‘The rest of what?’

‘The rest of the bodies, sir. It was spring, like I said. The thaw. Warmest spring in a decade. There was meltwater flooding in this valley and the next along. It brought bodies down. People who’d been dead since last year that we hadn’t found because they’d been frozen up. The tech-adepts say some of them might even be from the year before. Or as long ago as eight years.’

‘All ursid kills?’

‘The exact same specs, sir. Ursid kill, unidentified subjects. Two more of them female.’

‘How many bodies?’ asked Drusher.

‘I don’t know, sir,’ said Garofar.

‘Oh, come on, deputy. You’re on the case. How many bodies?’

‘I mean to say, I don’t know what the total’s going to be. We’ve got eighteen so far. They’re still digging up more.’

Drusher opened his mouth to speak. Nothing much was forthcoming.

‘We’ve got all the bodies downstairs. In the cold store,’ said Garofar.

‘Here?’

‘Yes. Orders of the lead investigator. He wanted all the bodies in one place for examination, so they set up a facility in the cellars where it’s cold.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Drusher. ‘You need a proper morgue and laboratory to conduct—’

‘Orders of the lead investigator,’ Garofar repeated.

‘Well, he sounds like an idiot,’ said Drusher.

‘Oh, he’s not,’ said Garofar. ‘I don’t know what he is, apart from damn scary, but he’s not an idiot.’

‘I disagree, and I’ll tell him so to his face,’ said Drusher. ‘I’ve only ever assisted law enforcement cases, but I know well enough there’s a proper procedure for this kind of thing.’

They had reached a door.

‘This the haunted bedroom, deputy?’ Drusher asked.

‘Well, the old man died here years ago,’ replied Garofar.

‘Which old man?’

‘Fargul. Last person to own this place. I don’t think he’s still here, so you’ll be all right.’

He opened the door, and they went in. It had once been a grand bedroom, but the plaster was crumbling, and the boards were bare. Large windows, the shutters open, overlooked the valley below. It smelled damp.

Drusher and Garofar halted in their tracks. There was a man standing by one of the windows, his back to them. He was staring out. He was tall, broad and solid, his bulk covered in a long, black coat.

‘Throne, but you scared me!’ exclaimed Garofar. ‘I didn’t know you were back, sir.’

The man turned to look at them. It was impossible to discern his age. His craggy face was grizzled and badly scarred. Augmetic plugs and leads trailed back from pinch points and sockets in his hairless scalp, and disappeared down under his high collar. His expression was impenetrable.

‘That will be all, deputy,’ he said.

‘Shall I tell the others that you’re—’

‘That will be all,’ the man said. ‘Unless you’d like to stay and discuss the unguarded sharing of confidential matters with outsiders.’

Garofar put the bag down, shot a look at Drusher and left.

‘You’re Drusher?’ the man asked, staring at Drusher. ‘The one Macks recommended?’

‘I am,’ said Drusher.

‘My name is Eisenhorn,’ the man said. ‘I believe there was something you wanted to tell me to my face.’



FIVE

Classified

Drusher followed the inquisitor back downstairs. The rain had come up again, and he could hear it pelting against the thick walls.

‘I didn’t mean anything by it,’ he said.

‘I don’t really care,’ replied Eisenhorn.

It was a slow descent. The inquisitor lumbered. His legs and lower body were braced inside some kind of augmetic exo-support. Every step was a heavy effort, every movement marked by the puff of hydraulic servos. Drusher had often thought himself old and in bad shape, but he was nimble beside the other man. How did a body even keep going after what must have been years of damage and injury? Surely there came a point at which enough was enough? There was an ugly stink of obsession coming off Eisenhorn, the stench of a man driven beyond reason to accomplish something. When was enough enough? Only in death? Drusher had heard that phrase often enough over the years, the noble mantra of the military. It was nonsense, obviously. Only an idiot thought that, or an idiot who pretended to be a hero. An idiot either way.

Drusher’s initial evaluation of the inquisitor had not changed, though he decided to keep that to himself. No point making his bad start worse. Sure, this Eisenhorn fellow was intimidating. He had the badge and the terrifying authority that came with it. But he was just another idiot of which the galaxy had so many: a man with delusions of grandeur; a man who felt he could make some kind of difference in the grand scheme of things; a man who believed his work mattered.

Try making a complete taxonomy, and tell me *that* matters, Drusher thought. Try doing *that* for seven years, and tell me it wasn’t hard work.

‘Perhaps you can tell me more about this investigation?’ said Drusher.

‘Isn’t that why you’re here? To tell me more about it?’

‘Well, I’ll need something to go on,’ said Drusher.

‘I think Deputy Garofar told you plenty.’

‘I just asked him, casually. He wasn’t really sharing classified information or anything—’

Eisenhorn paused and glanced at him.

‘In this situation, I decide what is classified, magos.’

Holy Throne, you’re an asshole, thought Drusher. I get it. You’re tough as anything, and years of privileged authority have gone to your head. You’re not impressing me at all with this ‘get a load of me’ act. Given the shape you’re in – mental, I’m guessing, as much as physical – you should have retired *years* ago.

‘Maybe, now you’re here, you can share some details?’ said Drusher curtly. ‘You want a magos biologis with specific expertise in the fauna of this planet.’

‘And you want passage off this world,’ replied Eisenhorn, ‘so that seems a reasonable basis for cooperation.’

‘So... I just do what you tell me to do?’ asked Drusher.

‘That would be adequate,’ Eisenhorn replied. He continued down the stairs.

Drusher pulled a face then hurried to catch up.

‘A reasonable basis for cooperation would be an exchange of data,’ he said. ‘I have questions.’

‘Proceed.’

‘Why have you taken this case away from local enforcement?’

‘That’s classified. Ordo business.’

‘Great. Have you always operated in such an unorthodox manner?’

‘Also essentially classified, but for the sake of this discussion, yes.’

‘Would it kill you to tell me more about this?’

‘Yes.’

‘I didn’t mean literally,’ said Drusher.

‘I did,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Do you find that people who meet you end up regarding you as an arrogant son of a bitch?’ snapped Drusher.

Eisenhorn stopped. He did not look around.

‘I mean, come now, sir,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m trying to assist. Could you ease off with this hard-nosed act?’

‘It’s not an act, magos.’

‘Terra’s sake,’ Drusher sneered. ‘Did someone once hurt you really, *really* badly?’

Eisenhorn slowly turned around to look at Drusher.

Drusher took a step back.

‘The list of people in this galaxy who have not hurt me is very, very short, magos,’ he said.

Drusher adjusted his spectacles, pursed his lips and nodded.

‘You’ve asked some questions,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘My turn. What is the average bite radius of *Ursa minora gershomi*?’

‘Twelve centimetres.’

‘*Majora*?’

‘A range up to seventeen,’ said Drusher. ‘Nineteen for the arctic form. The cave ursid—’

‘Is an ultra-rare, prehistoric form,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘It has probably been extinct for some centuries. If it exists at all, it is restricted to the northernmost area of Outer Udar.’

‘Oh, it exists,’ said Drusher. ‘Or, at least, it did thirty years ago. I have examples and evidence in my taxonomy. And you’re wrong about its locale. There were still some in the Tartred Mountains.’

‘Are there any other apex predators on this planet whose kills would resemble those of the banded or grey ursids?’

‘Not to an expert. You can’t rule out introduced exotics, of course.’

‘You’ve seen that here?’

‘More than once. Marshal Macks will corroborate that.’

‘Why do you want to leave Gershom?’ asked Eisenhorn.

The question took Drusher aback slightly.

‘My... my work is complete,’ he replied. ‘It has been for years. A complete taxonomy. It’s simply a case that there is nothing left to be done. But, unfortunately, economic circumstances prevent—’

‘You could have retired,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I hear that’s nice.’

‘I... sort of had, sir. Forced to by circumstances. I had a property down on the Bone Coast and – ahmm – worked with maritime ornithological efforts.’

‘You kept birds in a cage in a shack on the beach, magos,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Your retirement was enforced, by your own admission. If you

had been able to leave Gershom, at any point in the last three decades, you would have done so.'

'Yes.'

'Because, somewhere, there were still things to be done, things to be found, secrets to be learned?'

'Yes.'

'So it's fair to say that you would *not* have retired, given the choice, because there is still so much work to be done?'

'I suppose so,' said Drusher.

'Work that you really want to do, and which you would prefer not to leave in the hands of others to finish?'

'Yes,' said Drusher. Rain beat against the walls.

'I think we are beginning to find an accommodation, magos,' said Eisenhorn. 'You have let your light go out. I'm sorry for that. I have not let mine die yet. There is work still to be done on Gershom. Work I do not wish to leave to others. You can assist me, for it intersects with your area of specialty. And perhaps, in assisting, you may discover that there is still, and always will be, work of your type for you to commit your life to. As, I think, you always intended.'

'Show me the bodies, sir,' said Drusher.

'You have a copy of your taxonomy?'

'I do,' said Drusher.

'I ask that you show it to my savant, Audla Jaff. She will only need it for half an hour.'

He resumed walking. Drusher stood and watched him plod away painfully down the steps. A thought clarified.

'Hey! Sir!' Drusher called after him. 'How did you know I was even *thinking* about issues of retirement?'

Eisenhorn did not look back or reply.

Drusher hurried down the stairs after him.

'How did you *know* that?' he called. 'And how did you know I wanted to call you an idiot?'

In the cold main hall of Helter Fortress, the gathered team looked up as they heard raised voices.

Eisenhorn appeared, striding from the stair arch towards the basement doors.

'Sir-' Voriet began.

Eisenhorn held up a hand stiffly, not breaking stride.

‘I’m going to the cold store,’ he announced. ‘Harlon, Audla, Marshal Macks, with me, please.’

Drusher appeared, out of breath, red-faced, annoyed. He trotted after the inquisitor.

‘You’ve met him, then?’ asked Macks, grinning.

‘Shut up, Germaine,’ he replied.

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SIX

The Cold Store

Nayl drew back the bolts on the door and opened the cold store. It had been a root cellar, Drusher decided, serving the fortress kitchens through the winter when there had still been a garrison to feed.

The walls were whitewashed. There were eighteen steel gurneys arranged in rows, green plastek sheeting bagging the bodies. More gurneys were folded and stacked along the wall as if other visitors were presently expected.

Monitoring equipment was set up between the gurneys, radiating fields of prickly blue light.

‘It’s not cold enough,’ Drusher said immediately. ‘It’s not cold enough, and it’s too damp. This is no place for the preservation of organic remains.’

‘Correct,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Hence the stasis field generators.’

‘And if generator power fails?’ asked Drusher.

‘Then the fortress is going to start to stink,’ said Nayl.

‘And your evidence will be lost,’ said Drusher.

‘Evaluation, please, magos,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I understand it will be preliminary.’

‘Preliminary. Very well,’ Drusher said, nodding. He took off his spectacles, wiped the lenses and put them back on, but did not move.

‘These people were not the victims of ursid attacks,’ he said.

There was a pause.

Nayl looked at him.

‘You haven’t even opened a bag yet, magos,’ he said, gesturing towards the rows of gurneys.

‘Nevertheless,’ said Drusher.

‘Let him continue,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Magos? *Not* ursid attacks?’

‘No, sir.’

‘But there was evidence of feeding, Valentin,’ said Macks, bewildered. ‘I mean *gross* evidence. You always told me to look for—’

‘I think ursids may have fed on them, but they didn’t kill them.’

‘Expand,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Ursids kill people,’ said Drusher, ‘especially the smaller, more aggressive *Ursa minora*. But they don’t hunt them for food. An ursid kills a man because they meet by accident. The ursid reacts in surprise, or in defence of young. It kills, swiftly.’

‘Yeah, then it feeds,’ said Macks.

‘Sometimes,’ Drusher replied. ‘Ursids are omnivorous. They will eat flesh, meat of any sort, actually, even human. One might encounter a man, kill him, then feed. Or it might feed on a body if it finds one. But human flesh is not a regular part of its diet. It does not seek it out.’

‘But a rogue animal,’ said Macks. ‘One that’s got a taste for it. I mean, a taste for human flesh. That happens, doesn’t it? You once told me that.’

‘It does,’ said Drusher. ‘It’s very rare. The man-eater syndrome. Often a diseased or wounded animal. One whose aggression is compounded. Multiplied.’

‘So a rogue animal did this?’ asked Nayl.

‘Again, no,’ said Drusher.

‘You can tell that without even looking?’ asked Nayl.

‘You can compare bite prints or something,’ suggested Macks.

‘I can tell it by *counting*,’ said Drusher. ‘Eighteen bodies. Fifteen male, three female. Perhaps more to come. In a period of a year or two. How many ursids are there in the Karanines?’

Nayl and Macks looked at each other.

‘I’ll tell you—’ Drusher began.

‘Population sparse,’ said Audla Jaff suddenly. ‘As with all major carnivores or apex predators. An ursid’s average feeding ground is three hundred square kilometres. Slightly more for *minora*. When young are present, the range increases. Thus we might calculate the distributed population of the region, by taking the overall size of the area and dividing by an averaged figure of three hundred. Thus, about one hundred and thirty.’

‘Very good,’ said Drusher.

‘One hundred and thirty ursids in these woods?’ said Nayl.

‘In this province,’ corrected Drusher.

‘Actually, I was allowing for the entire run of the Karanine belt,’ said Jaff.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Macks. ‘One hundred and thirty. That’s a lot of ursids.’

Drusher looked at Jaff.

‘How much does an adult ursid consume in a year, mam?’

‘As much as it can,’ she replied. ‘But conservatively, three times its body weight.’

‘You see?’ said Drusher. ‘One ursid would not have killed and eaten eighteen plus human beings.’

‘Hang on,’ said Nayl, ‘you just said one hundred and thirty of them.’

‘As a total, distributed population,’ said Drusher. ‘We might attribute one or perhaps two deaths in a five-year period to accidental encounter and misadventure. Or we might explain multiple deaths to the action of a rogue animal, a man-eater, which, as I mentioned, is an extremely rare phenomenon. So a man-eater might have – and I *stress* it’s unlikely – killed eighteen poor souls... but it would not have eaten them all. That’s simply too much food, even for a large and aggressive ursid.’

Eisenhorn looked at him, steadily.

‘Interesting,’ he said.

‘Preliminary,’ said Drusher.

‘Then go beyond preliminary. What do you think killed them?’

‘Something else,’ said Drusher. ‘If examination reveals ursid feeding patterns, and I confidently expect it will be indicative of a non-frenzied pattern, then we might surmise that the local ursid population devoured found corpses. But they did not make the kills.’

‘Well surely,’ said Macks, ‘other ursids could have found and fed upon kills made by the rogue animal? You said it couldn’t eat them all itself?’

‘That’s possible, but again unlikely,’ said Drusher. ‘It’s a matter of territory. *Minora* are fiercely territorial. But let’s take a look.’

He walked over to the nearest gurney.

‘Do you have any–’

‘Oil of osscil?’ asked Macks, holding out a small pot.

‘I was going to say *True Heart*,’ he replied.

‘Don’t be smart,’ she said, but grinned. ‘Osscil or nothing.’

He took the pot, smeared some under his nose and unzipped the bag.

He stared for a moment.

‘Gonna throw up?’ Macks asked.

‘No,’ he said. He took off his spectacles and began to fiddle with them. ‘I just want to be able to see straight.’

Audla Jaff casually took the spectacles out of his hands and performed three quick, deft twists.

She reached up and put them back on his nose gently. They sat perfectly straight.

Drusher blinked.

‘Goodness me,’ he said.

‘Keep going, magos,’ Jaff whispered as she stepped back. ‘You’re impressing him.’

Drusher plucked a pair of surgical gloves from a carton, put them on and picked up a stainless steel probe from a tray. He hunched down and began to examine the exposed corpse. It was little more than a skeleton, blackened with old blood and tatters of congealed tissue.

‘There is some indication of an ursid feeding pattern. Tooth marks on the ribs here. If I can get a cast, I can confirm. Do you have an electro-macroscopic?’

‘Yes,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Then I can provide a comparative for you in a couple of hours. A side by side of bite marks and dental impressions. I think it will confirm the feeding patterns of several individual ursids. It’s not frenzied, just as I expected. They were scavenging.’

He looked up.

‘Was there feeding residue at the sites?’ he asked.

‘Feeding what?’ asked Macks.

‘Residue. Ursids are not clean eaters. They will tear chunks off. Scatter bones. Ribs, the bones of extremities.’

‘Some of the bodies were washed down by meltwater,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘So we have no idea where they were killed.’

‘But the ones that were found in situ? Where you presume they were slain?’

‘No,’ said Macks. ‘No residue.’

‘That’s odd,’ said Drusher.

‘Expand,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘It suggests those locations were not the scenes of the crimes, so to speak. It suggests the killing and perhaps even the feeding happened elsewhere.’

‘They were dump sites?’ asked Macks.

‘They were dump sites,’ Drusher nodded.

‘That’s criminal pathology,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘It is,’ agreed Drusher. ‘Ursids may have grazed the kills and destroyed evidence. That might have been intentional. But the victims were killed elsewhere, then dumped. Add to that, the extremely unlikely coincidence that all the victims cannot be identified on any local or planetary database. Even rogue ursid man-eaters do not select their prey on the basis of identity profiling. Which means, you’re looking for human actors, inquisitor. Men did this. This is serial execution or serial murder.’

He looked at Eisenhorn.

‘But you knew that already, didn’t you?’ Drusher asked.

Eisenhorn didn’t reply.

‘Then tell me, if you want me to work at optimum efficiency,’ said Drusher, ‘what brought the Inquisition into this?’

‘Eighteen deaths,’ said Nayl flatly.

‘No,’ said Drusher, still looking straight at Eisenhorn. ‘That’s a dreadful tally, but serial murder is still within the purview of the Marshal Division. There’s something else. You have positively identified at least one of these bodies, haven’t you? Long before you even got here.’



SEVEN

Spirits of Place

Drusher put on his coat, slung his satchel over his shoulder and went for a walk. The rain had eased back, and the sky over the valley was a hazy blue.

There was a woman at the fortress gate, a glum woman in Magistratum gear. Her name badge read 'Edde', and she carried a riotgun.

'Where are you going, sir?' she asked.

'I need to examine a few things,' Drusher replied. It seemed to him a better answer than 'I have to get away from these people for a while'.

'Have you been given permission to exit?' she asked.

'Of course I have,' he lied. No one had said anything to him about anything. After his assessment of the bodies in the cold store, Drusher felt as though he might have crossed a line. Eisenhorn had said nothing, except to send them all out of the room. Drusher wasn't sure if he'd revealed truths that had given the inquisitor new things to ponder, or if he'd exposed some secrets Eisenhorn had been keeping to himself. Had he impressed Eisenhorn into silence, or aggravated him? Eisenhorn was impossible to read. He didn't appear to express any nuance of reaction except a grim glare.

Deputy Edde looked at Drusher for a moment, then sighed and unlocked the gates.

From the fortress gates, the forest track ran down the valley through a thick break of trees. Drusher followed it for a while, then left the path and followed the slope of the valley deeper into the forest.

He began to relax. The air was clear and cool, and the scent of pine resin gave it a menthol tang. Sunlight shone through the tall, close-packed evergreens. The rolling forest bed was flax weed, deep green halibor, thistle, eye-wort and banks of antopies that brushed around his shins.

Climbing tracedy hung in gauze mantles around lower branches. He saw the meaty combs of blaxiform fungi sprouting from rotting bark, the white cushions of bellecap toadstools in the weeds, processions of senate ants marching vertically up tree trunks, leaves and fat white grubs carried aloft in their jaws like trophies and banners. The air smelled of wet loam, camphor and flower scent. Fat pollinator insects buzzed past. Invisible beetles clicked and chirred in the undergrowth. He heard the cooing warble of the wood dove, *Astra verdus*, and watched tiny brown seed finches dart and snap through the lower branches.

By the time he reached the stream, the fortress long since out of sight behind him, he had his notebook out and his old spotting magnoculars around his neck. He'd seen and noted redbeaks, four different types of arboreal warbler, two root-hens, still dowdy in the last of their winter plumage as they stalked nervously through the ground cover, and a mountain hawk. The hawk had been quite distant. He'd glimpsed it in a patch of sky, framed through the emerald canopy, turning silently on the thermals over the lower valley. *Destrus aquilus gershomi*, the little hill-hawk. He'd noted another sixteen avian species just from call and song.

The gurgling stream was a meltwater rill that followed the contour of the slope, breaking and sharply plunging over clefts and mossy boulders. He followed its course, and the deeper sound of splashing as it fast-fed a pool somewhere ahead. He watched for tracks in the mud, for ursid spore, but the heavy rain had been too recent.

He reached the pool. It was overhung on the rising side by huge blocks of tumbledown stone, swathed in moss. Three different streams fed the pool, the sparkling rush of their flow producing constant, intersecting ripple patterns across its surface. The skin of the water was also wiggling with hookfly larvae. Drusher climbed onto the overlooking stones and sat down to watch tiny, fawn darters skim and hunt the larvae.

There was a decent view. He could look out across the forest banks below, the dense stands of evergreens, and see the dark, sharp mass of the Karanine peaks that formed the opposite side of the high valley, forty kilometres away through the early afternoon haze.

He sketched the pool for a while, then the view. He sat patiently still for five minutes, with no sound except birdsong and the burble of the streams, as a timid crophorn deer came to drink.

He noticed that, despite extensive weathering, the stone blocks he was perching on had traces of hard edges. They had been worked: the remains of some building or wall, perhaps a watchtower guarding the lower approaches to Helter Fortress.

A cold breeze rustled through the forest, and he felt the temperature drop. The sunlight diminished as clouds passed over. More rain coming, he surmised. He wasn't bothered. He was shaded by trees, the cool air was a welcome relief from the bright heat of the day, and it wasn't the first time he'd sat out in a downpour.

Rain was honest. Drusher reflected that perhaps, more than anything else, that was why he had become a magos biologis, to spend as much of his life as he could outside, in nature – whatever nature happened to be – with its simple cause-and-effect systems. It kept him away from the company of people, with their lies and secrets and agendas and games.

That, or he simply wasn't very good at those sorts of interactions.

The thoughtful smile faded slightly from his lips. He was no longer alone. There was a man sitting by the edge of the pool below him. Drusher had no idea how long the man had been there, but he doubted it was more than five minutes. Drusher had been lost in his own thoughts and the tranquility of the place, but he was surprised he hadn't noticed the man arrive.

'Good afternoon,' he called down.

The man looked up and smiled. He looked pleasant enough. He had a round face, and wore a good walking coat and laced boots. He was sketching in a large, green-covered book.

'I didn't see you there, sir,' the man said.

Drusher clambered down. He got a glimpse of the man's sketch. It was a view of the valley, very finely done.

'I don't mean to disturb,' said Drusher.

'Not at all. I was just out, ambling around,' the man said. He continued to sketch.

'Are you a visitor?' Drusher asked.

'Oh no, I live nearby,' the man replied. 'You?'

'A visitor,' said Drusher.

'Ah well, it's that season,' the man said. He paused to put a point back on his graphite stick with a little pocket knife. 'And this area is very pleasant. The Karanines in early summer – wonderful air. Good for the spirit. I

sometimes wonder if, when our ancestors first came to this world, they stopped here because it was so agreeable.'

'It is indeed agreeable.'

'And fought over it, of course.'

Drusher frowned. 'Fought, sir?'

'You know, back in the past. The old tribes of Outer Udar, coveting this region because it was so bounteous compared to their sparse homelands. There were wars in these mountains for centuries. All forgotten now.'

'I confess I don't know much about war, sir,' said Drusher, perching on a rock near to where the man sat. 'Or history. I am a student of science and nature. A magos biologis.'

The man looked at him with interest.

'Is that right? Sir, I envy you. That's a fine calling. As a boy, I wanted to become a naturalist too. I won a place at Delci, the scholam there, to study the sciences of living worlds. But duty, you know. My family is in timber. My dear father, he needed a son with business acumen who could take over the trade, so I transferred to the universitariate at Tycho. Had that not been fate's path, I might have been a magos biologis myself.'

'But you still dabble?' asked Drusher.

'Oh yes,' the man said. 'When I can get out of the office, and away from invoices and shipment manifests and audits and labour disputes with the logging gangs. Any spare moment, you'll find me out here, away from it all.'

'You have a good hand,' said Drusher, gesturing towards the sketch.

The man looked down at his work, and propped the sketch up in its green card cover to consider it.

'Kind of you to say so, sir,' he replied. 'I'm sure I lack your skills of observation and execution. Tell me, are you staying nearby?'

'Very close by,' said Drusher.

'You're not a friend of Sark's are you?'

'Sark?'

'Draven Sark.'

'No, I don't know him.'

The man smiled and shrugged. Drusher found it hard to tell how old he was. He looked Drusher's age, but that meant little. So many people had juvenat treatment these days, those who could afford it. The man might have been a hundred years old and not look a day over forty. Drusher had

heard that recipients of juvenat work lived to ages of a hundred and seventy sometimes.

‘Old Sark’s a friend of mine,’ the man said, returning to his sketch. ‘A neighbour. I only ask because you’re the sort of interesting fellow he has as a guest. In the summer months, they come from all over. Sometimes off-world. I’ll tell you, the people I’ve met at his dinners over the years. Scientists, scholars, merchants, artists, fleet officers...’

‘What does this Master Sark do?’ Drusher asked.

The man frowned.

‘Why, I’ve known him thirty years. Must be at least that. He was one of my father’s friends to begin with. Thirty years, and I confess I don’t know exactly what it is he does. His background is science. Medical science. The old *Materia Medica*, but I think he’s in investment now. Bulk cargo shipping, mining... that sort of thing. I refer to him as my “very wealthy neighbour”. He lives in the old fortress.’

‘You mean... Helter?’ asked Drusher.

The man looked at him as if he’d made a joke.

‘No, no,’ he said, gesturing vaguely. ‘Keshitre. Further down towards the pass. Much older than Helter.’

‘As I said,’ remarked Drusher with a smile, ‘I don’t know the history.’

‘Oh, the Karanines are full of hill forts. Ancient places. Many are lost now, of course. Some of them are very grand. Palaces. From the Pre-Udarin Age. Keshitre’s one of those.’

Drusher nodded.

‘Out here alone,’ he said, ‘are you not concerned about coming to harm?’

‘From what?’ the man asked.

‘Ursid.’

‘Oh, I see them from time to time. They don’t bother you unless you’re stupid. I’m sure you know that, being a student of nature. You don’t seem to be afraid to be out here on your own.’

‘As you say,’ said Drusher. ‘I know what to do if I run across an ursid. I just wondered. There have been some deaths recently. Ursid kills.’

‘Really?’ asked the man. ‘I hadn’t heard that.’

‘Yes, of late.’

‘Well, thanks for the advice. I’ll keep an eye out. You know, though, one summer... it must be four or five years ago now, I was out sketching. Now, you were kind enough to compliment my work, but I’m very slow. Like

today, I can sit for hours before I produce anything halfway decent. So I'd been sitting for three hours, lost in it, and I looked up and – Throne take me – there was a king grey sitting right there. As close to me as you are now. Just minding his business. Huge, he was. So I just kept sketching. You know, no sudden movements. And he sat there for a while longer, then grunted and wandered off into the trees. Funniest thing.'

'You... you've been here awhile today, then?' Drusher asked.

The man squinted up at the sun.

'Oh, two hours at least before you came along.'

Drusher hesitated. He was about to speak when he heard someone calling his name in the forests above them.

'Someone's looking for me,' he said.

The man put his sketchbook down and got up. He offered Drusher his hand.

'Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, magos,' he said. He listened for a second to the voice calling out from the trees. 'Magos... Drusher, I believe?'

'Valentin,' said Drusher, shaking the man's hand.

'I'm Esic,' the man said. 'Mind how you go and watch out for those ursids, eh?'

Drusher wandered up the slope from the pool, and saw Nayl coming through the trees towards him. Nayl looked aggravated. He was lugging a large, matt-black lasrifle.

'What's the matter?' Drusher asked.

Nayl slithered to a halt on the mossy slope, and glared at Drusher. He activated the vox-set fixed to his collar.

'I've found him,' he said. 'Stand down.'

'What's the problem?' Drusher asked.

'You left the fortress.'

'So?'

'You don't go out alone. Or without permission.'

'Why?' asked Drusher.

'That's what Eisenhorn instructed,' Nayl snapped. 'Besides, you must have realised it's not safe out here.'

'Safe from what?' asked Drusher.

'Don't be difficult,' said Nayl. 'Come on. Follow me back.'

'There's a man down here,' Drusher said. 'It's odd, actually, he—'

‘What man?’ asked Nayl.
Drusher turned to point.
Down by the pool, there was no one at all.

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EIGHT

After Life

‘I just don’t understand,’ Drusher kept saying.

‘Then stop trying,’ said Macks. They were in the old kitchen of Helter Fortress, and she was brewing caffeine in a copper pot.

‘I suppose he could have wandered away when my back was turned,’ said Drusher. ‘But he said he’d been there for hours, and that can’t have been the case, because...’

His voice trailed off. He realised he was chafing his upper arms with his hand, and was still wearing his coat.

‘It’s so cold in here,’ he said.

‘It is,’ she agreed.

He walked over to the sink. His breath was making steam in the air.

‘There’s ice in the sink. Frost on the... on the *inside* of the windows. Macks?’

‘We’ve been told to ignore it,’ she said.

‘Macks, it’s a warm day outside—’

‘Is it?’ she asked wearily. She put two tin cups of caffeine on the old table.

‘Drink,’ she said.

Drusher peered up through the window. The sky was very dark and unsettled. It looked like evening setting in, but it was still mid-afternoon.

‘Is there a storm coming?’ he asked.

‘I guess there must be,’ said Macks.

He sat down, facing her.

‘What the hell’s going on, Germaine? I walked out of the gates not two hours ago, and it was sunny and clear. Now I come back and it’s like... midwinter.’

She shrugged. She looked uneasy, and Germaine Macks seldom appeared uneasy.

‘There’s stuff going on, and we’re instructed not to ask questions,’ she said.

‘That’s not really good enough,’ he replied.

‘It has to be for me,’ she said. ‘This is my job. I’m assigned to assist.’

‘Well, I’m not,’ he said. ‘I think I’ve had enough of this. I think I might go.’

She looked at him.

‘Don’t screw things up, Valentin,’ she said. ‘They’re offering you an off-world ticket. The thing you’ve always wanted.’

‘Well...’ he began. ‘I’ve done my part. I’ve done what I can.’

‘Tell me about this man you met,’ she said.

‘It was just a man. Out for a walk.’

‘And he vanished.’

‘No, of course he didn’t. He must have walked off. It was nothing.’

‘What did you talk about?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. The countryside. He was a local man. I think he said he was in the logging industry.’

‘Did he have a name?’

Before he could answer, the kitchen door opened, and Voriet and Betancore walked in.

‘We’d like to have a word with the magos,’ Voriet said to Macks. She nodded, then realised it meant they were asking her to leave.

Macks got up, shot a look at Drusher and walked out.

Voriet sat down facing Drusher. Betancore stood, leaning against the larder cupboards.

‘Let’s start with instructions,’ said Voriet. ‘You follow them, magos. You don’t come and go as you please.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Drusher.

‘You do now,’ said Voriet. ‘So that won’t happen again, will it? Not now you know.’

‘It’s for your safety, Valentin,’ said Betancore.

Drusher shrugged grudgingly.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘But I don’t like this very much at all.’

‘Now, about this man you met,’ said Voriet, ignoring the remark. ‘Tell me about him.’

‘I just went over this with Macks,’ Drusher said. ‘He was just a... a... He said he lived locally. He knew the area. The way he talked, he knew the history. He ran a timber business. Or his father did. I get the feeling he’d taken it over. That was it, really.’

‘But you thought it was odd,’ said Betancore.

Drusher turned to look at her.

‘Just in hindsight, really, mam,’ he said. ‘I didn’t see him approach in the first place. I just looked up, and there he was. And I didn’t see him leave. But I’m sure that was just me.’

‘You’re a very observant man,’ said Voriet. He put Drusher’s notebook on the table and opened it. ‘You’re a magos biologis. It’s part of the training. These notes you took today, they are testament to an acute level of observation. Details of plant and bird and insect that I would have missed.’

‘I’m not very good with people,’ said Drusher. ‘If he’d been a little hill-hawk, I could have probably told you which direction he flew off in, how fast and where his roost was.’

‘Did he tell you his name?’ asked Betancore.

‘Uh, yes. I think he said it was Esic.’

Voriet and Betancore exchanged glances. Betancore stepped forwards and put a data-slate on the table in front of Drusher.

‘Is this him?’ she asked.

‘No. No, that’s a much older man. Much older.’

She adjusted the display.

‘How about this?’

Drusher pushed his spectacles down his nose and squinted at the pict.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. That’s him. Who is he? Is he a suspect? Is he a criminal?’

‘His name is Esic Fargul,’ said Voriet.

‘So... related to the man who died here?’ asked Drusher.

‘Both images are Esic Fargul,’ said Voriet, ‘taken forty years apart. He *is* the man who died here. In the fifth floor bedroom, thirty years ago.’

There was a long silence.

‘Well, that,’ said Drusher, ‘I mean... *that*... that’s patently ridiculous. I mean, I spoke to him. I shook his hand.’

‘Quite possibly,’ said Voriet. ‘That doesn’t change the fact that he’s dead.’

‘I shook his hand...’ said Drusher quietly.

‘Take a deep breath,’ said Betancore softly. ‘Sometimes these things are difficult to process.’

‘No, not really, mam,’ said Drusher. ‘Groxxshit, however, is difficult to process. Your data is wrong, Master Voriet. He clearly isn’t dead.’

‘He died of age-related illness and poor circumstance,’ said Voriet. ‘He was ninety-seven.’

‘Then the body was misidentified.’

‘Magos Drusher, please try to accept this information,’ said Voriet. ‘Even if Fargul was somehow still alive, you admit the man you saw was much younger.’

‘Well, juvenat work,’ said Drusher. ‘It reverses the ageing process, doesn’t it? That’s what I’ve heard. I’ve never had it myself.’

‘I have,’ said Medea Betancore. ‘I am one hundred and sixty-four standard years old.’

Drusher’s eyes widened.

‘Inquisitor Eisenhorn is at least a century older,’ she continued. ‘Magos, juvenat work arrests ageing. It seldom reverses it. If Fargul was alive, he would not look fifty or sixty years younger than he did in later life.’

‘So, you’re telling me,’ said Drusher, ‘a more reasonable explanation is that I met a ghost?’

‘The term is inexact,’ said Voriet.

‘And shook his damned hand?’

‘Let’s talk about what you discussed with him,’ said Voriet.

‘No,’ said Drusher firmly. ‘No, that’s not going to happen. Two things are going to happen first. I want some anxiety meds. Strong ones. And I want an explanation that entirely lacks groxxshit. And that’s not an either/or thing. I want both. Now. Or I’m going to pack my bag and leave.’

‘Don’t be awkward, magos,’ said Voriet.

‘We need to tell him,’ said Betancore. ‘At least the basics.’

Drusher thought she was talking to Voriet, but he saw she was looking up into space almost blankly. There was a soft pop, as though Drusher had yawned and cleared his ears. He distinctly heard a voice say +Proceed.+

‘What was that?’ he asked.

‘I think it would be better coming from you,’ she said. Again, she was not speaking to Drusher or Voriet. ‘I know you’re tired, but I think—’

+Wait.+

Betancore looked at Drusher.

‘Wait a moment, magos,’ she said.

Drusher wiggled the tip of his finger in his ear. His head felt blocked and oddly pressurised.

+Main room.+

‘What was that?’ asked Drusher.

‘We’re going to the main room,’ said Betancore.

Eisenhorn was waiting for them. He was sitting in a high-backed chair, and he looked as if he were enduring some silent torment. Drusher felt that Eisenhorn was not so much sitting in the chair, as the chair was preventing him from falling into the centre of the world. His breathing was laboured.

Audla Jaff was lighting candles to draw back the gloom in the great hall. It was still cold, and the chill seemed to radiate from the inquisitor. Outside, a storm had begun to grumble.

‘Have a seat, magos,’ Eisenhorn said.

Drusher sat down facing Eisenhorn. Voriet and Betancore withdrew to sit on a bench at the back of the hall. Jaff lit the last of the candles and joined them. There was no one else around.

‘I have psykana abilities, magos,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Do you know what that means?’

‘I suppose so. I’ve never met someone who—’

‘You probably have. We don’t tend to advertise our talents. Mine are considerable. You had an encounter today. When you left the site without permission—’

‘I’m sorry about that—’ Drusher began.

Eisenhorn raised a hand to hush him.

‘I have no interest in rebuking you, magos. To be honest, I am exhausted. I don’t have the time or patience to bring you into line. If you wish for a rebuke, say so, and I will leave it to Voriet and Nayl.’

‘By all means do continue,’ said Drusher.

‘Your encounter today was with a psykana echo. An unanticipated side effect of work I was doing in the cold store.’

‘A psykana echo, sir?’

‘You referred to it as a ghost,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘That is a surprisingly accurate term.’

‘It was a ghost?’

‘Yes.’

‘I... well...’ Drusher hesitated. ‘That’s very curious. I don’t know what to think about that. I may cry a little bit.’

‘Don’t,’ said Eisenhower.

‘Do my best,’ mumbled Drusher.

‘Magos, your assessment of the bodies was interesting to me. It confirmed things that I had thought of, ideas I had begun to form. It was remarkably incisive. It revealed secrets that I have not shared.’

‘Thank you. Did it?’

‘The Inquisition is interested in this case for precisely the reasons you suggested,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Marshal Macks circulated the facial reconstructions on all networks. One came to my attention. A person I knew. That’s what brought me here.’

‘You knew one of the victims?’

‘Personally. She worked for me. A field agent. Her name was Thea Inshabel. An interrogator. The daughter of a very old and dear friend, who had joined me to continue her late father’s work. She came to this system nine years ago to follow leads relating to a larger case I have been pursuing. She came at my request. Such investigations, magos, they take time. Years. I had not heard from her for some while. Her reports had become intermittent. I was concerned, but sometimes ordo agents in deep-cover operation are forced to go dark, for their own safety. Interrogator Inshabel was a very experienced and able operator. I was confident that she...’

He paused.

‘I should have sent someone to find her,’ he said. ‘I should not have waited so long. I owed that to her father. To watch out for his daughter...’

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ said Drusher.

‘Now she’s dead,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Her bones lying, unclaimed and unidentified, in Marshal Macks’ morgue. Her reconstruction of Thea’s face brought me to Gershom. To find out what she had found out.’

Drusher tilted his head to the side, questioning.

‘It’s very difficult to get answers from the dead,’ said Eisenhower.

‘I can imagine,’ said Drusher.

‘But there are means,’ said Eisenhower. Thunder rumbled on the far side of a neighbouring mountain, and the first drops of rain began to strike the hall’s windows. ‘A process of divination, of psychometric assay. It is a testing and complex craft, and should be attempted only by those who are well trained, or those who are prepared to face the consequences.’

‘I’m not sure I know what you’re describing, sir,’ said Drusher.

‘In layman’s terms, magos, a séance.’

‘Oh,’ said Drusher.

‘The term we use is auto-séance,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Thea left nothing except her bones. No clothing, no effects, no trace of where she had been for nine years, where she had lived. So, when I first arrived, I conducted a psychic audience with the remains. It was... unpleasant and unrewarding.’

‘I...’ Drusher began, but didn’t really know what to say.

‘Thea had been dead for too long,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Her psionic essence was too far detached from her mortal relics. Also, I have reason to believe the means and process of her death were so reductive, so annihilating, that nothing sensible remained. I reached out and touched something, but it was not coherent.’

Eisenhorn shifted in his seat and took a sip from a glass of amasec that had been placed by his side. His hand was shaking.

‘I extracted only one thing,’ he went on. ‘A brief, fragmentary impression of an old fortress. It was not a clear mental image, but research had shown that there were several old structures in the Karanine region. Old fortresses from the settlement era. This place, Helter, resembled the vision. It was the only such structure that remained intact within the vicinity of the bodies that were found in situ. So, I transferred my party here to begin an investigation, a thorough search of the surrounding area.’

‘And you brought the bodies too,’ said Drusher.

‘Yes,’ replied Eisenhorn, ‘so I could repeat the auto-séance process with each one. It was a gruelling process. Some were utterly inert. From the rest, I obtained nothing but incoherent pain. So, I widened my search and conducted similar divinations at the sites where bodies were found, as well as other locations in the forest. Again, nothing. As you have demonstrated, convincingly, they were dump sites. No psychometric echo of the victims’ lives or the moments of their deaths would have lingered there anyway.’

The rain was beating hard now. Lightning blinked in the high windows.

‘About today,’ said Drusher. ‘In the woods—’

Eisenhorn cleared his throat.

‘After you made your report,’ he said, ‘I felt an urge to try again. To restage the divination with poor Thea’s body. It was a grim and thankless effort that has left me drained. But I believe it had an unexpected consequence. While I was here, in the cold store, trying to reach Thea

Inshabel, the considerable psykanic backwash rippled out into the surrounding forest. It stirred up ghosts, Magos Drusher. Ghosts I was not aware of. Which is how you came to meet Esic Fargul in the woods today. A man thirty years dead. I was conducting my séance in his home, magos, the place where he had lived and the place where he died. It is hardly surprising that it might raise him up into the sunlight.'

'Not to you, perhaps,' said Drusher. 'I have to say, sir, that I am half out of my mind just now. Fear, sir. At what you are telling me. At *you*. Fear and incredulity. I spoke to the man for ten minutes. He was real. He was solid. I could see him and hear him and smell his hair oil and the sweat of a body that has walked briskly in the sun for a whole afternoon. I... I shook his hand.'

'We have used the word *ghost* carelessly, magos,' said Eisenhorn. 'A psionic manifestation can be very real. Utterly convincing, especially to one who does not realise that it is what it is.'

'Or that something like it could even exist,' said Drusher. 'May I...? May I have an amasec?'

Eisenhorn made a small nod, and Audla Jaff came over. She handed Drusher a fine old glass filled with amasec.

'If it eases your mind at all,' said Eisenhorn, 'I doubt the phantom of Esic Fargul knew he was a ghost either.'

'With respect, it doesn't really,' said Drusher. He knocked back the drink in one. Jaff, waiting patiently nearby, stepped in and refilled the glass.

'What did you speak of, magos?' asked Eisenhorn.

Drusher shrugged feebly.

'We talked as two men of similar interests might if they met by chance,' he replied. 'Of nature. Of the country and its various species. He had a leaning to natural history. He... he asked if I was a visitor, if I was staying nearby. He told me he was a local man, with a timber business and—'

'When he asked you that,' Eisenhorn interrupted, 'what did you say?'

'I told him yes,' said Drusher. 'That I was staying in the area. I didn't say where. So he asked me if I was a guest of his neighbour.'

'His neighbour?'

'A friend. A local man of some influence who entertained famously.'

'His name?'

'His name?' Drusher echoed. He frowned. 'I can't recall. Straker? No, Draker? Something like that. Draven something. Draven Sirk? Stark?'

‘Sark?’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Was that the name?’

‘I think it was. I can’t be sure, but... Sark. Draven Sark. I feel that’s what he said.’

‘So did Thea,’ said Eisenhorn quietly.

Voriet rose to his feet.

‘My lord,’ he said. ‘You said you got nothing today.’

‘I didn’t think I had, interrogator,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Just sounds. Noises. The wailing psionic roar of the warp. But one sound repeated, and now the magos says the name, I know that’s what it was. A name. Sark. Thea Inshabel was screaming it.’

‘I will begin a search for the name,’ said Jaff. She looked at Drusher. ‘Do you know the spelling?’

‘Of course I don’t,’ said Drusher.

Eisenhorn slowly rose to his feet, almost clawing at the edge of the table for support.

‘Throne,’ he murmured. ‘All along, Inshabel was trying to tell me something. It was the last remaining fragment of her, the only thing she had strength of will to hold on to. One word. One name. And I didn’t realise...’

Medea Betancore had come to his side to steady him.

‘You should rest, Gregor,’ she said.

‘I should work.’

‘Leave it to us, for now,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Let us do the research. Rest and regain your strength. You’re no good to us otherwise.’

‘I know where he lived,’ said Drusher. Everyone looked at him.

‘This Draven Sark,’ said Drusher. ‘The ghost told me. He said Sark was a neighbour. He lived in another old fortress close by. Down towards the pass, he said, and older than this place. Pre-Udarin he called it. Its name is Keshtre.’



NINE

That Which Is Not There

‘Come with me,’ said Voriet.

Audla Jaff had gone off to begin her research. Drusher wasn’t sure what that meant, and he didn’t like to imagine. Medea Betancore had begun the slow process of leading Eisenhorn up the stairs to his chamber. Full night had closed in and with it a thunderstorm of monstrous proportions. Lightning strobed at the fortress windows. The shutters rattled, and the stone hallways resounded with the drumming of rain outside and the frantic dripping within, as water drained through the ragged roof and dribbled into pots and buckets.

Voriet led Drusher to a small parlour behind the kitchen where the others were waiting. A fire had been lit, and it was verging on cosy. Macks looked up as they entered. Nayl was by the hearth, chatting to the three deputies. The storm had driven Cronyl and Edde indoors. Their boots were off, and they were trying to dry their socks against the fire.

‘Has something happened?’ asked Garofar, lowering a mug of caffeine.

‘We may have a lead,’ said Voriet. ‘Can I borrow you, marshal?’

‘Of course,’ said Macks, rising to her feet.

‘We need some local data,’ said Voriet. ‘You have maps. I’ll need your link to the Magistratum database.’

‘No problem,’ said Macks. ‘That is, if the up-link is still working. The storm’s playing blessed hell with vox connections. Look, if it’s local information you need, ask my deputies. I’m not from the area, but they were all born in Unkara.’

‘Keshtre,’ said Voriet. He looked at the deputies. ‘Mean anything to any of you?’

‘Not me,’ said Edde. Cronyl shook his head.

‘The bad place?’ asked Garofar.

‘What?’ asked Voriet.

‘Like in the bedtime story...’ Garofar’s voice trailed off. He blushed. ‘Sorry. I wasn’t trying to be funny.’

‘Go on, Hadeed,’ said Macks.

‘I don’t know, mam,’ said Garofar. ‘It was just a story. A faerie story. The bad place up in the hills. Keshtre. Where the monsters lived. We had to go to bed when we were told and behave and stuff, or the monsters would creep down in the night and steal us away.’

‘Where is it?’ asked Drusher.

‘Begging your pardon, sir,’ said Garofar, ‘it’s not anywhere. It was just a made-up thing.’

‘It’s a fortress, apparently,’ Voriet said to Macks. ‘Near here. Towards the pass. That’s right, isn’t it, magos?’

‘That’s what the ghost told me,’ said Drusher. He knew he could have phrased it better, but he quite enjoyed the look his comment got from everybody.

‘There’s no other fortresses near here, sir,’ said Cronyl. ‘Not between here and the pass. The closest is Angmire, but that’s forty kilometres north.’

‘No, Korlok is closer,’ said Edde. ‘That’s near town. Over west.’

‘Oh yeah, Korlok,’ said Cronyl, ‘but that’s just a ruin.’

‘Well, they’re all ruins,’ said Edde, ‘apart from Helter. And this place isn’t much better than a ruin.’

‘Yeah, but Korlok and Angmire aren’t *ruined* ruined,’ said Cronyl. ‘I don’t mean fallen stones and traces. The woods are full of that kind of rubble. I thought we were talking places that are still standing.’

‘This place would be intact,’ Drusher said to Voriet. ‘At least, in recent memory. There was somebody living in it maybe fifty or sixty years ago.’

The deputies shook their heads.

‘Nowhere like that, sir,’ said Edde.

‘You sure you mean Keshtre?’ asked Garofar.

‘What about the name Draven Sark?’ asked Drusher.

The deputies looked blank.

‘Let’s go check it,’ said Macks. ‘All the research material is in the library. Garofar, you come along.’

‘Do you need me?’ Nayl asked Voriet.

‘Get your things together, Harlon,’ said Voriet. ‘Take Cronyl and Edde, and do a sweep. Make sure we’re locked down.’

Drusher and Macks followed Voriet up the stairs to the library. Garofar hurried along behind them, buttoning his service jacket.

Drusher hadn’t seen the library before. It smelled of damp. Rain battered at the shutters and rustled the plastek sheeting. The room was lit by glow-globes and candles. The wind was fluttering the candle flames and stirring loose papers stacked with the piles of old books.

Audla Jaff was sitting on the chaise, working methodically through a pile of tomes.

‘Anything?’ asked Voriet.

‘The name Keshtre appears in three folk tales,’ she replied. ‘It’s not a location. It’s just a myth. An imaginary place.’

‘Why would he have told me a lie?’ asked Drusher.

‘Who?’ asked Macks.

Drusher shook his head.

‘The word is not Unkaran dialect,’ said Jaff. ‘All the fortresses have names of Karanine origin. Even those of the Pre-Udaran Era. “Keshtre” is a derivative of the Fent language of Outer Udar. Possibly a pre-Gothic proto-root. It means “speaking place” or “meeting place”. A moot or court, perhaps, but there is a sinister aspect to it. Literally, “forbidden speaking place”, or “place of unholy speech”. I repeat, it’s not a physical location. It’s not on the maps. It’s not in the histories.’

‘It could be an old name for somewhere else,’ said Drusher.

‘Not that I’ve found,’ said Jaff. She looked somewhat annoyed.

‘Keep looking through the old man’s books,’ said Voriet.

‘There are only a few I haven’t reviewed,’ Jaff replied.

‘Then go back over the rest,’ Voriet snapped.

‘I retain everything I read, interrogator,’ Jaff protested.

‘Just do it,’ said Voriet. ‘I’m not doubting your abilities, savant. We now have key words to look for. Names. Keshtre and Draven Sark. We have an approximate location. You may make a connection that you didn’t make before.’

She sniffed.

‘Of course,’ she said, and turned back to the books.

‘We’ll look over the area maps again,’ said Voriet. Garofar and Macks were already rolling out the Magistratum charts on a side table. They had

territorial surveys dating back nine decades.

‘She doesn’t like you much,’ Drusher whispered to Voriet.

‘Audla is very precise,’ replied Voriet quietly. ‘Inhuman levels of retention, processing and data comparison. She is offended when I question her efforts.’

They began to study the maps. Voriet uncased a portable cogitator and plugged its cables into a vox-caster signal amplifier that stood on the floor nearby. He began to type.

‘Damn,’ he muttered. ‘The link keeps going down.’

‘We could drive back to Unkara Town,’ said Macks. ‘Use the hardwired system in the Magistratum building.’

Voriet looked doubtful.

‘I’ll keep trying for now,’ he said. ‘This storm’s got to ease back at some point.’

‘There’s nothing on the maps,’ said Garofar.

Drusher was peering over the deputy’s shoulder. He had quickly identified the symbols for *ruin (standing)* and *ruin (site)*. Most of the latter represented sites that he doubted would be apparent to anything except ground-penetrating auspex, geophysical detectors or the high-gain scanning of fleet survey vessels. You could visit them in person, walk around and see nothing that suggested a structure had ever been there. He found Helter Fortress marked and saw there were several *ruins (standing)* and *ruins (site)* to the south and west within a hundred kilometres. But nothing to the north and east, where the spur of the range ran.

‘That must be the pass,’ he said, tapping the map with his fingertip to indicate a significant pass through the Karanine range that lay north of Helter Fortress.

‘The Karad Pass,’ agreed Garofar.

Down towards the pass... that’s what the ghost had said.

‘So he must have meant this area here,’ Drusher mused. He circled the tract of mountain country between their current location and the dramatic formation of the pass at Karad.

‘Who?’ asked Macks.

‘My source,’ said Drusher carefully.

‘Look,’ said Macks, ‘if it’s not a place, like Hadeed says. Not an actual *place...*’

‘It’s just a story,’ said Garofar. ‘Honestly.’

‘What? We’re wasting our time?’ asked Drusher.

Macks shook her head.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Like you said just now, it could be an old name for something else. Or a fanciful name someone gave to somewhere else. I mean, not official. Look, imagine Fargul had moved into this place and decided to call it Fargul’s Palace instead of Helter Fortress. That wouldn’t necessarily be recorded on a map or the title register. Likewise, he could have called it Elysium or Vaartuk. You know, ironically?’

‘Vaar-what?’ asked Drusher.

‘Vaartuk,’ said Macks. ‘It’s a local dialect word for heaven or paradise. Udaric, right, Garofar?’

‘I think that’s right,’ said the deputy.

‘You mean, he calls it that because it’s a nice place to retire to?’ Drusher asked.

Macks looked at him patiently. It was a look he knew well.

‘You’re getting hung up on my example, Valentin,’ she said. ‘I’m making it up as an illustration. This Draven Sark... you said he was a rich man. Influential. He had a grand country seat. He could have cheerfully trashed any name it used to have and given it a new one. Something his friends and acquaintances would know it as, but it wouldn’t be official.’

‘So it could mean anywhere,’ said Garofar. ‘Any old site in the province?’

‘Potentially,’ said Macks.

Drusher sighed.

‘I don’t think so. Near to Helter, but towards the pass. I know that’s not specific enough, but it’s still specific. That’s the area.’

‘Well, you’ve seen for yourself,’ said Macks. ‘There’s nothing in that area at all. It’s wilderness.’

‘We could try older maps,’ said Garofar. ‘What about the settlement-era territory surveys? They might be on file at the Administratum annex. Or even in the museum?’

‘No,’ said Drusher. ‘We’re not looking for some site so ancient it had vanished before we started making modern maps. It was an occupied dwelling less than a century ago. It can’t have completely vanished in that time.’

‘Unless, you know, it’s a shade hall,’ said Garofar.

Macks and Drusher looked at him. The deputy gestured, embarrassed, to brush his remark aside.

‘Ignore me,’ he said. ‘It was supposed to be a joke.’

‘I’ll ignore you, Garofar,’ said Macks, ‘once you explain what a shade hall is.’

‘Well, that’s what they said about Keshtre in the old stories,’ he replied reluctantly. ‘In the faerie stories. That it was only there some of the time. It appeared at night, so the monsters that lived inside could roam, then it faded away at dawn, back into the realm of shades.’

Macks glared at him.

‘I shouldn’t joke,’ said Garofar. ‘I know this is serious, mam. I’m sorry.’

‘The shade hall or faerie mound is an ancient trope,’ said Audla Jaff, looking up from her work. ‘A liminal location, a threshold place, that exists between the material world and the otherworld. It’s a concept that recurs in works of folklore right back to Old Terra.’

‘Don’t try and make excuses for him, mam,’ Macks said to her. ‘We’re not looking for a faerie mound.’

She turned her attention back to the deputy.

‘Garofar? Why don’t you go see if Master Nayl needs help with the sweep?’

‘Yes, mam,’ said Garofar sheepishly, and hurried from the room.

‘Anything?’ Macks asked Voriet. He was still at work on the cogitator.

‘I might have found a reference to the name Sark,’ said Voriet. ‘But the link is damn slow. I keep having to resend and start over.’

Drusher wandered over to the bookshelves. He ran his finger along the old, decaying spines. There were a lot of books of natural history. Esic Fargul had liked his ornithology. Drusher saw old treatises on migration and nesting patterns, guides to birdsong, feeding grounds. He saw a slim volume at the end of the shelf called *Folk Verse of the Karanine Passes* and took it down. Damp had got to it. It was very much the worse for wear.

‘There’s nothing in that, sir,’ said Jaff, not even looking up.

Drusher frowned at her dubiously.

‘She knows, magos,’ said Voriet. ‘Trust me on that.’

Drusher opened the old book anyway. The pages, rotted away, flaked out in a puff of damp fibres, unintelligible.

‘Literally nothing, in this case,’ he said. Macks sniggered.

Drusher looked at the book for a moment longer, the empty, discoloured cover, the mulch of paper fibres clinging to the binding. Something that had been but was no longer.

Valentin Drusher's worst enemy was his own imagination. It was a fact he had recognised and accepted many times in the past.

'What if...' he began.

'Valentin?'

'Macks, what if the deputy was right?' he said.

'Meaning what?' asked Macks, coming over.

'That this Keshtre place only partly shares our physical reality? That it's not... not there all the time? Just like the scary bedtime stories say?'

Macks put her hands on her hips and gave him a withering look.

'I know,' he smiled. 'The version of me that got here this morning would have looked at me exactly the same way. But... Germaine, the things I've seen today. The *impossibilities*... I have always been able to codify the living world, according to its rules and its laws and its constants. I look for that. My work is about that. It's reassuring. It's comforting when things make sense. But now I'm not sure of anything. I think *anything* is possible. The rules of sense be damned.'



TEN

Restless

The storm continued into the small hours. After midnight, the thunder diminished into a background grumble, but the downpour increased, beating at the walls and roof like tympani. It felt as though the whole mountainside would wash away in a deluge of mud and take Helter Fortress with it.

‘I’m going to do a sweep,’ said Macks. In truth, she needed to clear her head. She was beginning to fall asleep over the charts. A circuit would clear her drowsiness.

Voriet and Jaff barely looked up from their work to acknowledge her comment. Drusher had already retired – to his bed, Macks presumed. She buckled on her uniform jacket, picked up her riotgun and a plastek slicker, and left the library.

The fortress was silent, except for the drumming rain and the constant spattering chime of the roof leaks spilling down into pans and buckets. Everything smelled damp. Only a few lamps and candles had been left along the galleries and staircases, so Macks fished out her stablight. On the second floor, she saw Medea Betancore on a bench outside the chamber reserved for Eisenhower. Betancore was working through a data-slate. She looked tired.

‘Anything, marshal?’ she asked as Macks approached. Macks shook her head.

‘He’s sleeping at last,’ said Betancore, tilting her head towards the chamber door. ‘He needs it.’

‘You need it too, mam,’ said Macks.

‘In a while, perhaps,’ replied Betancore. ‘I’ll stay here for now, in case he needs me. The dreams... wake him.’

Macks nodded. Betancore returned to her data-slate, and Macks made her way back to the stairs.

She went down to the main entrance, pulling on her slicker. Nayl had set up lighting rigs in the yard on their arrival, and she could see their white glow backlighting the small windows above the door.

She dragged the door open.

The yard was bathed in harsh white light from the rigs. Where the heavy rain caught in their stark glare, it made dark stripes like vertical interference bands on a pict-feed. Macks could hear the chatter of the portable generator running the rigs, a murmur behind the constant snake-hiss of the downpour.

She saw Nayl across the yard by the gate. Edde was with him, and they had the main gate dragged open a yard or two, so they could look out into the night. Macks hurried across to them, the rain pattering off her plastek shroud. The air was cold and fresh. She already had water running down the back of her neck.

‘Anything?’ she asked.

Nayl glanced at her, water dripping off his solid chin.

‘Something tripped the outer sensors about half an hour ago,’ he said. ‘Probably just an animal, but Garofar and Cronyl are checking.’

‘Should I get everyone up?’ she asked.

He shook his head.

‘Probably just an animal,’ he repeated.

‘Keep me advised,’ she said. ‘I’ll sweep the house.’

Macks returned to the main building. She heaved the heavy door shut and shook off her slicker. She checked the kitchen, then the small back parlour. The fire there was still burning, making it the most comfortable room in the place. Drusher was asleep in an armchair. He hadn’t gone to bed after all. He’d brought books down from the library, and one had fallen open across his chest as sleep claimed him. A book on migration habits in the Karanines. Macks saw delicate line drawings of wildfowl. She closed the book and set it aside, drew Drusher’s old coat across him as a blanket, and, as an afterthought, bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

He stirred slightly, mumbled and went back to sleep.

Macks had just entered the main hall when she heard the voice. It sounded like a cry. Not a cry of pain, but an urgent call, like someone far away shouting an order.

She halted, listening. The hall was empty, and the candles had burned out. She heard the odd call again, in the distance, muffled by the rain. This time, when it came, her vox-set squawked simultaneously, as if echoing the cry.

Macks adjusted the collar-mounted set. It emitted a quick squeal, then a harsh flood of static.

‘Mister Nayl?’ she said, tipping her head to talk into the mic. ‘Mister Nayl, this is Marshal Macks. Do you copy?’

Static fizzled.

‘Nayl, come back. This is Macks.’

There was a burble of audio noise, and then she heard Nayl’s voice.

‘Reading you, Macks.’

‘What was that?’ asked Macks.

‘That noise?’

‘Affirmative.’

‘Not sure,’ Nayl’s voice crackled back. ‘Garofar and Cronyl just got back to the gate. Cronyl thinks it was an animal cry.’

‘Your vox go weird?’ asked Macks.

‘Yeah, just for a second,’ Nayl replied. ‘I think it’s atmospherics. We’ve just got rain here now, but I can see some fierce electrical displays further down the valley.’

Macks wasn’t convinced, but she knew how the storm had played hell with Voriet’s up-link before midnight.

‘Stay in contact,’ she said. ‘I’m going down to the cold store, then I’ll walk the west wall.’

‘Channel open,’ Nayl responded.

Macks opened the cellar door and followed the stone steps down into the undercroft. There was no light except for her powerful stab-beam.

Then her eyes began to detect a faint blue glow.

The door to the cold store was ajar. The glow of the stasis fields was shining out into the hall.

‘Nayl?’ she said into her mic. ‘The door to the cold store is open. Has anyone been down here?’

Static burbled back.

‘Nayl, respond.’

Just more, oddly modulated interference.

Macks waited for a moment. She wanted to move in with backup, but she didn't want to leave the door open, and she'd have to if she was going to go and fetch Nayl and the deputies. She locked her stablight onto the under-rail of her riotgun and moved forwards, aiming the light beam with her weapon.

The door hadn't been forced. The bolts were on the outside, and they had been drawn back.

Slowly, she eased the door open a little wider with the muzzle of her gun and peered in. The whitewashed chamber was lit by the blue ghost-light of the field units. The gurneys sat in rows, green plastek sheets over the remains.

Over *seventeen* of the gurneys...

One, in the middle of the rows, was empty. The plastek sheet was crumpled on the stone floor beside its wheels.

One of the bodies was gone.

Macks cursed under her breath. She edged forwards and slowly settled down into a crouch so she could peer under the rows of gurneys and play her stablight around. Nothing. No heap of bones on the floor.

And how did a bundle of bones fall off a gurney anyway?

Macks rose again slowly, her weapon raised and ready. She realised she was breathing hard, and she forced her herself to slow the rate. She backed gently to the doors and stepped out into the corridor.

'Nayl?' she whispered into the mic on her collar.

Still nothing. She braced her weapon with one hand and pushed the cold store door shut, re-setting the bolts.

Something beside her screamed.

Macks jumped in shock and wheeled around, her weapon levelled. Her heart was racing. There was nothing there. She circled, hunting the length of the corridor both ways with her powerful beam. Nothing.

The scream came again.

'Throne!' she spat. It was her vox. Her damn vox. It was squalling and yelping, uttering shrill bursts of audio-wash.

'Nayl!' she snapped, gripping the collar unit with one hand. 'Nayl, respond!'

She headed back towards the stairs to the main hall.

'Nayl? Someone's been into the cold store. There's a set of remains missing. Nayl!'

Static fluttered.

She half heard her name, scrambled by the interference.

‘Nayl, do you copy?’

‘Marshal? Say again—’

‘Nayl, the cold store’s been opened. A body’s gone.’

‘Copy that.’ Nayl’s reply was masked with noise.

‘Meet me at the entrance,’ she barked.

Silence.

‘Nayl?’

She reached the main hall and closed the cellar door. For a moment, she thought she saw someone standing at the far end of the hall, a figure in the shadows. But as soon as she turned her stablight that way, it was gone. Just her imagination. She’d got herself spooked. Her mind was playing tricks.

She headed for the front entrance, but changed her mind and switched down the side passage to the parlour first. Drusher was still sound asleep in front of the hearth.

‘Valentin?’

She shook him.

‘Valentin!’

He woke up, bleary.

‘What? Is it... What?’

‘Something’s going on,’ she said. ‘Get up.’

‘What?’ he asked, blinking. ‘What sort of something?’

‘I don’t know. Something.’

He got to his feet, his limbs stiff.

‘You looked scared,’ he said.

‘Just get your coat on,’ she replied.

‘Germaine, why are you scared?’ Drusher asked.

‘Shut up, and get your coat on, magos,’ she said. ‘We’re going outside.’

He struggled into his coat. She could see that she’d alarmed him. He wasn’t properly awake, and everything was an effort.

‘One of the bodies has gone,’ she said.

He looked at her.

‘Gone? In what way?’

‘In a “not there any more” way, Drusher. I just checked the cold store. A body has gone.’

‘Taken?’ he asked.

‘Well, of course. How else would a body disappear? Someone’s in the house.’

‘You’ve seen—’

‘I haven’t seen anything, but someone must have come in. Hurry up.’

He followed her to the door, and they went out together into the kitchen passageway.

There was someone at the far end, by the hall door.

‘Mister Nayl?’ Macks called out. She raised the stab-beam.

She’d found the missing body.

It was standing up, a twisted skeletal figure, caked in dirt and black organic tatters. It began to limp towards them.

Certain things had trailed Valentin Drusher around his whole life. Poverty was one, frustration was another. A lack of confidence. A wounded sense of being overlooked. All of those things had visited him on an intermittent basis.

But fear had been, pretty much, a constant companion.

Drusher’s fear took many forms. Sometimes it was abstract, like his fear of failure and its ugly, contrary twin, his fear of success. He was afraid of authority and afraid of being forgotten. Mostly, his fear manifested as a simple fear of pain. He was a nervous, timid man, who lived in dread of a midnight knock at the door from a predatory road-mob, or of getting in a fight when he was minding his own business, or of being dragged away and beaten by law enforcement if his papers weren’t up to date. He was afraid of heights and of drowning. He was afraid of being hurt.

A lingering early memory was the fear of the aggressive canine his father had kept, a creature that never seemed to tolerate Drusher. During his long years of training and education, he had lived in perpetual anxiety about being bitten or stung or clawed by the lab animals and wild specimens he was examining. Even as a magos, that fear had persisted, making him tentative in his work and his studies. He knew a lot about animal behaviour, and, for the most part, he knew how to avoid the risks and handle potentially dangerous life forms, but the most basic rule of all was that even a magos biologists never knew everything, and that an animal, especially one trapped or surprised, could do the unexpected. The damn sea raptor had remained in its cage for months because he’d been too afraid to get near to it.

Twice in his life, he had faced things that were truly fearful: the unholy xenos specimen that he and Macks had cornered in a mill in Outer Udar years before, and the psychotic killing-thing he had hunted in Tycho City.

Those fears lived with him and woke him at night, even though the dangers had long passed. They were hard-edged fears, and they tasted bitter, like dirty iron pressing on his tongue. They made his pulse skip and his skin go clammy. They made him dull and stupid, as if fear were a weight that pressed common sense and logical response out of his head. Both of those truly fearful experiences had happened when he was in the company of Germaine Macks. She was like a damned jinx that made bad things happen to him. Not insane adventures. That was a euphemistic, jolly term that suggested thrills and excitement. Just *bad things*. Things that had put him in the path of genuine, violent extermination. Things he didn't wish to repeat or even remember. The closest he'd ever come to death.

But there in the kitchen passageway of Helter Fortress, with Macks' stablight – yes, Macks there yet again, the common denominator of his misfortune – with her stablight illuminating the ghastly and impossible as it hobbled towards them, he oddly felt no fear at all.

The figure was simply unbelievable. Old human bones, mottled and stained by loam and mildew and decay, roughly assembled in anatomical order, scabbed and crusted with mould and dried-black blood and residual masses of dead sinew and tissue. The empty eye sockets were dark pits of shadow.

For a moment, time seemed to dawdle, as if waiting for Drusher's mind to catch up. He became aware of how *not frightened* he was. Perhaps he was simply denying what was in front of him, refusing to accept it. Perhaps it was just so extraordinary it had taken him beyond the limits of any fear he could register.

Perhaps the day had already been too strange. He had been forced to accept things that his scientific background did not allow for. The workings of the psyanic mind, the notion of speaking to the dead, the post-mortal apparition of an old man. He had, for Throne's sake, shaken hands with a ghost. Perhaps the strange day spent in the company of Eisenhower and his curious band of assistants had acted as a crash course, a steep learning curve into the truths of the unknown. Perhaps the day had been like a baptism, annealing his soul and his fear so that it was ready for this moment.

Or perhaps... perhaps it was just too *fascinating*. Drusher's curiosity, the appetite for wonder and discovery that had steered him into his profession, had eclipsed all fears. Even the xenos thing he had faced in the windmill all those years ago, that had been definable. He'd been able to know it, to describe it in accurate terms. He'd been afraid of it simply because it had been going to kill him.

But this... this was beyond his considerable framework of knowledge. He wanted to know what it was. He wanted to understand *how* it could be, how it could exist. It was just organic waste, the skeletal relic of a dead human being. It had no life. It was a broken frame that had once supported life, but that was all. Even on a basic level of organic engineering, the greater part of the mechanism was missing. There were no muscles or tendons left to support or move the bones, no blood supply to feed those muscles, no nerves to stimulate motion and control balance, no heart to pump the blood, no organs to fuel the process, no brain in that cranium to make walking a desire, no eyes to see them with.

But it saw them. And it walked, a precarious, slow walk like a frail old man. It saw Valentin Drusher and Germaine Macks, and it walked towards them.

'That,' Drusher said, almost brightly, 'that is highly unlikely.'

Macks mumbled something that wasn't properly a word. The approaching figure appeared to shudder slightly. Drusher realised that the powerful stab-beam transfixing it was quivering. Macks' hands were trembling wildly. He could hear her sobbing and hyperventilating.

He knew, under any other circumstances, he would be doing the same thing. His mind would have closed down in the choking paralysis of fear.

'Germaine?' he said gently. 'Germaine?'

He put his arm around her shoulder. She was shaking so badly it felt like she was vibrating. She was making an odd, mewling sound. She couldn't *not* look at it.

Drusher couldn't look away either. But he reached out with his free hand and took the riotgun from her, keeping the stablight aimed at the walking thing. He squeezed his arm tight around her quaking shoulders.

'Germaine? Come on,' he said. 'Come with me. Take a step backwards. That's it. And another.'

He edged them towards the parlour door. She shook against him. Drusher could smell the thing advancing towards them. He could smell rot: not the

gross, gagging stink of putrescence, but the faded, dry fragrance of end-stage decomposition.

‘Germaine? Another step.’

They had reached the parlour door. He pushed Macks into the room, and she almost fell through the doorway.

Drusher turned back to face the walking thing.

‘What are you?’ he asked. ‘Can you speak? You shouldn’t be able to, but then you shouldn’t be able to walk either. Can you tell me what you are? Can you tell me how you are possible?’

The figure could not. It simply continued its inexorable trudge towards Drusher. Its right arm began to rise, as if it were reaching out to touch him.

‘I’d like an answer,’ said Drusher. ‘If you won’t answer or you can’t, I’d like you to go.’

By the light of the torch fastened under the barrel of Macks’ heavy weapon, Drusher saw that some kind of energy discharge was crackling over the walking bones, like a faint bioluminescence. It was an electric-green, which reminded him of deep-sea leachfish, or the cave worms, *Nematodus cryptus*, that he had catalogued in Southern Gersha. The glow came and went, never totally present. For a moment, it shimmered around arm bones, and he saw the brief, ghostly tracteries of veins and capillaries. He saw phantom tendons and intercostals come and go across stained ribs. He saw spectral organs pulse in the abdominal void. Some kind of energetic pattern, a light-echo of the lost soft organics. Green pinpricks lit in the empty orbits of the skull sockets, the ghosts of eyes.

‘If you don’t answer, then we’re done,’ said Drusher. ‘This will be good night. I won’t allow you to come any closer. I have a gun. It will shatter what little is left of you.’

The skeletal thing took another wavering step closer.

‘I warned you,’ said Drusher. Very calmly, he thumbed off the weapon’s safety, braced it in a low grip because he knew it would kick, and fired.

In the tight confines of the passageway, the boom was deafening. The blast hit the figure in the sternum.

The explosive force dissipated like steam. Drusher heard flecks of shot patter onto the stone floor, all force spent. The figure kept coming, as though nothing had happened.

‘Throne,’ said Drusher. He charged the pump grip and fired again, then repeated quickly. Each shot blew out like vapour as it reached the

advancing thing.

Only now did fear begin to register in Valentin Drusher. He felt it creep into his joints like frost, numbing him. He got the first taste of bitter metal on his tongue.

He fired one more shot, then ran into the parlour and slammed the door.

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ELEVEN

At the Threshold

He locked the door behind him. As an afterthought, he dragged one of the old armchairs over and shoved it against the door.

Macks was staring at him. Her eyes were red, and she wiped at her dripping nose with her sleeve.

‘We, um,’ he began.

‘Did you see it?’ she whispered. ‘You saw it too?’

He nodded.

‘I shot it,’ he said. ‘Several times.’

‘Did you...’ she asked, her voice very small, ‘did you kill it?’

‘Not... no,’ he said. ‘Not really at all. I don’t think it can die, because it’s not alive. Something odd happened with your gun. Is it loaded... I mean, did you put some kind of blanks in it?’

‘What are you even saying?’ she gasped at him, incredulous.

‘Blanks, you know... *pooofff!*’ he said. ‘The shots didn’t do any damage. Like they were just dummy rounds.’

Macks swallowed hard. She took a step forwards and snatched the gun from his hands.

‘Breacher rounds,’ she said, popping the slide open to show him the red Munitorum stencil on the yellow sleeve of the ready shell. ‘It will blow a hole in a bloody door. Knock a man down, even in armour.’

‘Do they... do they go off?’ he asked. ‘I mean, do they spoil. If you don’t use them?’

‘You’re an idiot,’ she snapped, staring at him with wide eyes. ‘What are you going on about?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said, trying to sound calm even though a degree of panic was now rising in him, as if he were wading slowly and steadily

deeper into an ice bath. 'I shut the door. I locked it.'

'Oh good,' she said sarcastically. She sat down in the other armchair, then immediately got up again. 'You saw it, right?' she asked him. 'You saw... *that*?'

'I did,' he said.

'I've never...' she murmured, pacing. 'I swear by the Throne, I've never been so scared. That was... impossible. I mean, completely and utterly bloody impossible.'

'In the most literal and scientific way,' he agreed.

'Is it still outside?' she asked.

Drusher looked at the locked door and the chair wedged up against it.

'Probably,' he said. 'I'd prefer not to check.'

Macks looked nervously around the small room. There were no other doors and no windows.

'We can't get out,' she said. 'If it's outside the door...'

'It can't get in,' he replied. 'It will go away...'

She looked at him.

'You didn't freeze up,' she said. 'Why didn't you freeze up? You always freeze up.'

Drusher shrugged.

'I don't know. Scientific curiosity,' he said.

'Groxshit,' she said. 'You kept it together somehow.'

'I've rapidly developed a high threshold for strange,' he said. After a moment, he added, 'I think it's beginning to hit me now, though.'

There was a soft noise. They both looked at the door sharply.

It was a scratching sound, like a hound pawing to be let in: the coarse, dry scrape of unfleshed distal phalanges clawing at the old wood of the door.

Macks cursed. They both backed away from the door.

'It can't get in,' he said. 'I locked it. It can't get in.'

He felt that if he repeated it enough, it would become true.

Something started to happen to the door. It shivered slightly, then a dark patch began to appear at shoulder height, as though a blowtorch were being applied to the other side. The patch grew and spread. The wood began to flake and fall away. It looked for all the worlds of man as if the wood were simply and rapidly decomposing.

Macks swore again.

The decay spread, eating the wood away. Flecks of pulp billowed out from the collapsing surface, as though invisible swarms of boring insects were desiccating the wood and devouring it. Macks and Drusher could smell burned sawdust and mildew.

A portion of the upper panel fell away. The decay spread was accelerating. A powerful corrosive sprayed on the door could not have gnawed the fabric away so fast. A bone hand reached in through the gap, flaking the wood, clasping and unclasping at the open air.

‘Oh Holy Throne...’ Macks murmured.

The door began to collapse in its frame. Parts of it became smoke that boiled with electric-green sparks, motes of dust that tumbled as they burned out. Larger sections fell out whole, bursting into dust as they bounced off the armchair and hit the ground. The figure began to push its way in. They saw the green light of its stare burning from its hollow sockets. They heard the squat legs of the old, heavy chair scrape on the flagstones as it was slowly shoved out of the doorway.

Macks fumbled for her vox.

‘Nayl! Nayl!’ she yelled. ‘For Throne’s sake! Help us! The parlour! The parlour behind the kitchen! It’s going to kill us!’

The vox-channel warbled back, wordlessly.

Drusher looked around frantically. No other doors, no windows... He ran over to the hearth. The firebox was mounted in the stone chimney place, a later addition to replace the original open fire. Black iron pipework vented the flue up into the chimney itself. The chimney was blocked around the main flue with a sooty metal plate.

He tried to move the firebox, but withdrew his hands instantly with a yelp. Though the fire was dying, the metal was still hot. He kicked instead, savagely and repeatedly, trying to dislodge the firebox from the fireplace. It gradually began to shift. The chimney plate came loose at one side, spilling out clouds of choking soot, and the flue split.

Macks glanced at him.

‘What are you doing?’ she yelled.

‘The chimney,’ Drusher replied as he kept kicking furiously. He said it as if that were explanation enough. She understood his meaning.

‘We won’t fit up the chimney!’ she yelled.

‘Yes, we will!’

‘We can’t climb—’

‘Yes, we can! Help me!’

‘It won’t work, Valentin!’ she shouted.

He paused, breathing hard from the exertion.

‘The alternative is staying in this room,’ he said.

He started kicking again. The firebox shifted with a shriek of metal on stone, and sooty clouds spilled out of it.

Macks looked back at the door. The thing was nearly through. Only the chair stood in its way, blocking it.

‘Nay!’ she yelled. ‘Assist now, for the love of Terra!’

She hoisted the riotgun and began to shoot, methodically pumping shot after shot at the thing. One round blew out part of the door frame. Another punched through the headrest of the arm chair, filling the air with clouds of white kapok. Each shot that hit the thing itself fizzled into nothing.

It strained on relentlessly past the obstacle. Bone hands clawed at the chair, and decay began to spread out from its touch. The upholstery started to wither and perish, exposing yellowed stuffing, springs and wooden frame, then those too began to disintegrate. The chair gradually decomposed from the seat-back down, dissolving into dust. One arm slumped aside as the back-frame powdered. Hungry green sparks writhed on the remaining upholstery.

Macks turned to Drusher and began to kick with him. The firebox dislodged entirely and fell heavily onto its front. They pulled at the broken vent and the chimney plate, ignoring the burns they got from the metal. Accumulated black filth poured out of the flue, decades of dust and soot. They were both coughing and choking.

The plate fell out with a clang.

Drusher looked over his shoulder. The chair was all but gone. The thing was in the room.

‘Get up there!’ he yelled at her.

‘You first!’

‘Just get up the chimney, Germaine! I’ll boost you!’

She tossed the riotgun and wriggled down into the hot cavity of the chimney place, groping for handholds on the stone. Drusher bent down and made a stirrup from his hands, cradling her right foot to hoist her.

‘Climb!’ he yelled. ‘Climb, Germaine!’

He didn’t dare look behind him.

He didn’t want to see it when it happened.

Macks' head and upper body were inside the flue. He could hear her scrabbling for grip.

'It's too small!' he heard her yelling, muffled. 'It's too tight! I can't!'

Old, heat-cracked stone inside the chimney gave way. Macks lost her grip and came crashing back out, chunks of stone falling with her. She almost landed on Drusher. They both went over in the hearth.

'Magos! Stay down!'

Drusher heard the commanding voice. He saw Nayl in the doorway behind the walking thing. Garofar and the other deputies were crowding in behind Nayl, staring in utter dismay at the sight in front of them.

But Nayl's face was grim, as if he'd seen the impossible far too many times before. He raised his lasrifle.

Drusher grabbed Macks and pulled her as flat as he could, covering her head and shoulders with his own arms and body.

Nayl fired a sustained burst. Shrieking bolts of light ripped into the parlour, striking the figure from behind, doing nothing but making it jerk a little. Stray bolts tore past it, blowing holes in the far wall over Drusher and Macks. Several shots crippled the old wooden dresser pushed against the wall. It shook, sagged and toppled over on its front.

The figure swayed then slowly turned to face Nayl and the deputies behind him.

'Oh, Holy Terra...' Garofar gasped.

The figure took its first lurching step towards Nayl. It raised its right hand to stroke his face.

Nayl fired again. The las-bolts pummelled at its ribcage, but their heat and light vaporised on contact, becoming a lambent crackle that radiated out across the skeletal form, and vanished.

Nayl cursed. He stood his ground in the doorway and let go of the lasrifle, so that it dropped hard onto its sling, swinging at his waist. He drew a heavy autopistol from a chest holster, ejected the clip, racked the weapon open and took a single round from his breast pocket. He fitted it into the open receiver, slammed the slide shut and took aim with both hands.

The thing was just an arm's length from him.

Nayl fired.

The shot struck the figure in the forehead. The skull burst like a smashed vase. Bone shards sprayed in all directions.

Headless, the figure wavered for a moment. Electric-green energy patterns coursed and flickered around its frame.

Then they winked out.

The dead bones abruptly disarticulated and collapsed like rubbish tipped out of a bucket. They fell in a heap on the parlour floor where the figure had been standing. Thin smoke curled up from the mound of bones.

Nayl lowered the pistol.

‘Get Eisenhower,’ he said.

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TWELVE

The House of Sark

Early morning light speared in through the slit windows of the washroom on the second floor of the fortress. It was a grey day outside, but the storm had cleared, and the rain had eased back to drizzle.

Drusher was clean, but shivering. There had been no hot water to fill the tin tub, and it had taken a long time to scrub the fireplace soot out of his skin. He had a clean shirt, but his jacket and trousers were the only ones he'd brought along, and he had been forced to put them back on despite the dirt that had rubbed into the fabric.

Macks came in. She'd washed earlier, and her uniform looked clean, but her face was drawn and pale.

'I brought you these,' she said and held out a box of dressings for the burns on his hands.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

She looked away, then took a breath and busied herself applying salve to his palms and fingers. He held his hands out obediently. He wanted to say something, something about what had happened. And not just the horror that had overtaken them in the parlour. About everything. About their chance meeting twenty-seven years before, about their insane adventures, which, to him, included three oddly sweet years in Tycho City that had finally ended in a lot of shouting and slamming of doors.

As usual, and as then, his interpersonal skills failed him.

'The Archenemy of mankind,' she said eventually.

'The what?'

'That's what it was,' she said. 'What they preach about, what they tell us to watch for. I never really thought... I never really thought it was real. But that, *that* was real.'

‘I’ve never thought about it much myself,’ he replied. ‘I know the edicts, the directives, but I’ve always found life quite challenging enough without believing in... in supernatural forces. I guess I’m like you. I never thought it was real.’

‘It’s what the ordos deal with,’ she said, unwrapping some dressings.

‘I always thought the ordos were autonomous secret police,’ he said. ‘You know, enforcing order, maintaining the Imperial Truth. All that talk of daemonic forces, just propaganda to keep us all scared and in line.’

‘Well, the Inquisition is here,’ she said, ‘so I suppose we’re dumb for not taking it seriously.’

‘Is it?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

Drusher shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’ve been thinking about things,’ he said. ‘About all of this. You said they needed me because I was the only magos biologis on Gershom. Not that I was the *best*, just that I was the only one—’

‘Oh don’t start over,’ she sighed.

‘No, hear me out,’ he replied. ‘This isn’t self-pity. I may *well* be the only magos biologis here. Good *or* bad. But think about the case. This Eisenhower has a ship. A crew. Significant resources. Technical specialists like that Jaff woman. He hears about the case here from off-world. He knows one of the victims is this woman he claims to know. He comes here. That’s shift travel. A commitment of time and expense. But before he set out for Gershom, he knew the victim – *all* the victims – had been mauled by animals. That was an established part of the case. He knew he’d need an expert. So, I’m wondering, why didn’t he bring one?’

She didn’t answer.

‘I mean, the ordo must have plenty of specialists on staff,’ he went on. ‘Consultants they can call on at the drop of hat. But he didn’t bring one.’

‘Well, he thought he’d find one here.’

‘Yeah, a crappy one like me? If he got here and realised he needed specialist help, why didn’t he signal to the ordos to send someone? Someone really good?’

‘Like you said, Drusher, time. Time and expense.’

He shook his head.

‘I don’t buy it,’ he said. ‘He comes unprepared, and he makes do with a has-been like me. Don’t look at me like that. I know I’m no great shakes,

Germaine. I'm not that deluded. But he makes do.'

'The hell are you suggesting, Valentin?' she asked.

'I'm saying, maybe he's not as connected as he wants us to think,' said Drusher. 'He and Voriet can flash all the badges they like, and pretend to be all sorts of important things, but what if this isn't legitimate at all?'

'You mean... you don't think they're from the ordos?'

'I'm saying that's possible. Or this whole thing is deeply unofficial. A... How do you people phrase it? A rogue operation. Sending for a high-level magos biologis would have raised flags. I don't know if Master Eisenhorn is a real inquisitor or not, but I think what he's doing here is strictly off the record.'

'I think you're paranoid,' she replied.

'After last night, aren't you?'

She snapped the aid-box shut.

'Well, it's moot anyway,' she replied. 'The storm's cleared. The up-link is re-established. I'm going to contact the area governor this morning. Establish an emergency situation and ask him to mobilise the Territorial Guard. If the Archenemy is here in Unkara, it needs to be contained, and this little group of ours isn't up to the task.'

'I don't think Eisenhorn's going to like that,' said Drusher.

'He can stick it up his arse for all I care,' said Macks. 'I'm Magistratum, and I have a duty.'

He smiled at her.

'That's what I always loved about you, Germaine.'

'What?' she asked.

'You, being you. Never backing down.'

She grinned.

'I did last night,' she said.

'Last night was different,' he said.

'Very,' she replied. 'You were very different. You faced that thing down. You saved me.'

'I think that was Nayl.'

'No, you kept it at bay. You didn't stop trying. Not like you at all.'

'Must be the mountain air.'

She suddenly hugged him tight and planted a long, loud kiss on his cheek.

'Thank you,' she said.

She walked to the door.

‘Oh,’ she added, turning to look back. ‘Nayl’s cleaning out the mess in the parlour. The bones and stuff, they’ll have to be quarantined. But there were some books you’d brought down from the library. I told Nayl not to move them without checking with you. I didn’t know if they were important.’

Drusher went down to the parlour. He felt uneasy returning to the scene of the horror. Daylight made everything seem very ordinary, but he could still smell burned sawdust and cold decay.

Nayl, wearing surgical gloves, was scooping the brown bones into a hazard waste sack.

‘Books,’ he said when he saw Drusher. He pointed to a side table in the corner. ‘Do you need them?’

‘I might,’ said Drusher. He walked over to the books and began to gather them up.

‘How did you kill it?’ he asked.

‘Head shot,’ said Nayl.

‘You made it look easy,’ said Drusher.

‘Nothing easy about it.’

‘I fired the riotgun at it multiple times. So did Macks. No effect. It somehow neutralised the force of the shots.’

‘Yeah, I heard you gave it a go. Good for you, magos.’

‘And that combat weapon of yours. You dumped some serious las into it.’

‘I did.’

‘With no effect. Yet a single bullet...’

Nayl looked up at him.

‘That thing, magos,’ Nayl said. ‘It was an animation process. An energy form that had simply inhabited the dead bones. It was using them as a framework to move around in, to interact with the physical world.’

‘I saw a shimmer on it,’ said Drusher. ‘An aura. Like an afterimage.’

‘Right. So that energy form, it can just soak up kinetic damage from a pump gun, or the high-yield las expended from my weapon.’

‘And manipulate that energy to eat through doors. And people.’

‘Correct.’

‘But a single bullet somehow...?’

‘It wasn’t the bullet,’ said Nayl. ‘It’s what was *written* on it. Eisenhower etched it himself and gave me a stash of them. A charm, if you like. Like an

amulet. The charm broke the energy field and let the bullet do its damage.'

'Well, I'll take your word for that, Master Nayl. It sounds a lot like hocus-pocus nonsense to me.'

'Me too,' said Nayl. 'But if hocus-pocus nonsense works, you go with it.'

'It sounds like this thing was created,' said Drusher. 'I mean artificially manufactured. And let out.'

Nayl rose to his feet.

'You figured that out, did you?' he asked.

'The cold store door was unbolted,' said Drusher. 'Macks said so. The thing didn't eat its way out, and that's the only way it could have opened the door. So it follows that someone made it and let it out for a reason.'

'There's the makings of an investigator in you yet, sir,' said Nayl.

'What was the reason?' asked Drusher.

'To kill us all,' said Nayl. 'That's my bet. Because maybe we're getting too close to something. What happened last night could have happened any night in the weeks since we arrived. But it happened *last* night. So something happened yesterday that took us all a step too close to the truth. And you know what happened yesterday, magos?'

'No, what?'

'You got here,' said Nayl.

'That's not a very cheery notion,' said Drusher.

'Shall I tell you why I think there's more to you than meets the eye?' asked Nayl. 'Why I think you've got that something that marks a good investigator? You don't ask the stupid questions.'

'What would they be?' asked Drusher.

'Well, since we've been talking, you haven't once asked what it was.'

'I presumed there wasn't a word for it,' said Drusher. 'Or if there was, it would be part of a concept that was meaningless to me as a man of science.'

'That's pretty smart,' said Nayl. 'And you haven't asked who let it out.'

'Because I think you'd have told me if you knew,' said Drusher. 'Or it's classified, and there's no point asking in the first place.'

Drusher carried the small clutch of books back up the stairs to the library. They weren't significant, just essays on wildflowers and ornithology. He'd borrowed them to ease his mind, to refresh his thoughts with something familiar and reassuring. But they belonged in the library, so he was going to put them back there. You didn't borrow a fellow naturalist's books and not return them. Even if that fellow naturalist was thirty years dead.

He heard hammering from the basement. Macks' deputies had been ordered to seal the cold store.

The library was empty. The plastek sheeting on the windows rustled in the breeze. He started to slot the borrowed books back onto the shelves. The last one was the book of migration patterns in the Karanine area. It had been the most interesting, clearly one of Fargul's favourites. The old man had filled the margins with pencilled annotations, remarks drawn from his observations of the seasonal influxes and exoduses. Those little jottings had been what Drusher had found most comforting. The marks of a man who had happily spent years wandering the hills in all weathers, witnessing the patterns of nature, noting unusual sightings, rare specimens and the most likely sites for the observation of particular species. The handwritten notes gave Drusher a sense of kinship.

He flipped through the pages one last time, before putting the book away, relishing the constant delight expressed in Fargul's notes. How the crosshammers always congregated along the same stretch of river each year before beginning migration, gathering in such numbers the trees were bowed with them. How the forests rang with call-and-response in spring when the exhausted redbeaks searched for their life-mates to reunite after the arduous voyage back. How the returning charhoops flocked at the pass in early summer, swarming and mobbing in huge clouds before continuing on up into the hills...

Drusher paused. He read the note again. Surely...

He flipped through the pages and speed-read some of the other annotations. The same thing, several times. Could it be *that* simple?

He put the book down and began to skim along the spines of the shelves. Geographic history... The origin of place-names...

He pulled out a volume or two and put them aside when they proved useless. He lighted on another and tried that instead. There it was. The text confirmed his idea.

'Holy Throne,' he murmured.

He took the geographic text and the annotated book, and turned to hurry out. He stopped.

He'd just noticed another book, tucked away at the end of the shelves.

'I'm sorry, that's simply not appropriate, marshal,' Eisenhower was saying. He was sitting at the table in the main hall and looked more robust than he had the night before. Sleep had restored him, at least in part.

Voriet and Jaff sat with him. They had been reviewing data-slates together. Nayl and Betancore stood nearby. All of them were looking at Macks, who was standing at the far end of the long table, Garofar at her side.

‘Well, tough,’ said Macks.

‘Marshal, I’d watch your tone,’ said Voriet.

‘I think what I’ll watch, interrogator,’ replied Macks, ‘is the welfare of the Imperial citizens in this province. The Archenemy is abroad. I saw its handiwork with my own eyes. I am going to contact the governor and declare an emergency, and I’m going to ask him for military support to—’

‘We can deal with this, marshal,’ said Voriet. ‘That’s why we’re here. This is our specialty. Leave it to us to make the decisions. Don’t hinder us by complicating the situation.’

‘I have authority in this province,’ said Macks.

‘An authority superseded by the ordos,’ replied Jaff.

‘Let’s allow the governor to make that distinction,’ said Macks. ‘He can overrule me. He may urge a Territorial mobilisation anyway, to support your work. And, of course, he has the authority to request immediate clarification and authorisation from the Office of the Inquisition on Brallant.’

‘I can’t allow that,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘This matter is complex and sensitive. What you’re suggesting will delay things and potentially place more people in harm’s way.’

‘Are you asking me not to?’ asked Macks. ‘Or telling me not to? Or are you going to actually stop me doing it?’

‘Cooperation would be the ideal remedy here,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘I think that’s good advice,’ said Drusher as he walked in. He dumped the three books on the table. ‘I think it’s very good advice, and I think we should all take it.’

‘Magos, please,’ said Voriet. ‘This is a private briefing. The marshal’s already interrupted and she was just about to leave—’

‘You recruited me to serve as an expert advisor,’ said Drusher, pulling out a chair and sitting down at the table. ‘Well, I have some expertise to share. I think if you’re really interested in the most efficient resolution of this matter, we could all start to cooperate. You’re keeping Macks and me in the dark, and I don’t want any more crap about things being classified. Let’s start sharing, shall we?’

Voriet and Jaff glanced at Eisenhorn. As ever, he was unreadable.

‘What do you have, magos?’ Eisenhorn asked quietly.

Drusher wagged his finger.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘You show me yours and I’ll show you mine.’

Garofar snorted. Macks elbowed him.

Eisenhorn sat back. He drummed his fingertips on the tabletop thoughtfully.

‘Want me to clear the room, sir?’ asked Nayl.

‘No, Harlon,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Take a seat, marshal. You too, deputy Garofar. My interrogator was just delivering new material. Now the storm’s passed, the up-link is re-established. Voriet?’

Voriet looked at him anxiously.

‘Sir, are you sure that—’

‘Your report, please, interrogator.’

Voriet cleared his throat and activated his data-slate.

‘Draven Sark,’ he said reluctantly. ‘The local annals have no listings for anyone of that name, so it appears that Draven Sark was never a resident of, or visitor to, Gershom. However, he is in the Subsector Census. Current age two hundred and fifty-one standard, whereabouts unknown. A very high-ranking and respected magos medicae in his day. His grandfather is an interesting figure, a senior recollector in the Administratum. His name was Lemual Sark, and he secured his footnote in history four centuries ago through his research on Symbol Iota, which led to a breakthrough in the battle against a virulent pestilence known as Uhlren’s Pox.’

‘Also known as blood-froth, or the Torment,’ said Jaff. ‘It was a pandemic. Sark’s work was crucial in containing—’

‘I am familiar with the case,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Sark was able to confirm that Uhlren’s Pox was not a natural contagion or a xenos plague, but in fact a weapon deliberately bio-engineered by a servant of the Archenemy.’

‘Really?’ asked Macks.

Eisenhorn looked at her. ‘That detail has been classified and withheld from the general population, marshal. I have just un-classified it. So Draven Sark is a descendant?’

‘That’s the case, sir,’ said Voriet. ‘The whole Sark family line has been engaged with Materia Medica for many generations, either as medicae experts or medicae specialists serving the Administratum. In Draven Sark’s case, the former. He retired decades ago.’

‘Whereabouts unknown?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘Yes,’ said Voriet. ‘But it appears he continued to practise on a private basis. In retirement, he assumed several identities. Sadrane Carnac, Philipo Bosk, Emmet Pelet...’

‘Why does a respected medic take on assumed names?’ asked Macks. Voriet smiled.

‘The circumstances of his retirement are sealed,’ he said. ‘One may presume malpractice, and a quiet effort to avoid scandal. Draven Sark and his various alter egos have been persons of interest to both the Arbites and the ordos at different times over the last century. He has a history of unfortunate associations. Nothing that could lead to prosecutions, but enough to convince me he walks in the shadows of lawlessness.’

Voriet scrolled through his slate.

‘Some seventy years ago,’ he said, ‘Philipo Bosk was listed as a resident of Gershom, specifically of Unkara Province. He owned property here, paid his tithes, was listed as “retired”.’

‘Where were his properties?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘Unknown,’ said Voriet. ‘A great number of municipal records were lost during the civil war. All trace of Philipo Bosk vanishes about twenty years ago. But we have pictis of him, and comparative recognition cogitation confirms within an error margin of decimal zero-zero-two per cent that Bosk and Sark are the same man.’

‘So, he disguises his identity, but not well,’ said Betancore. ‘A simple verification reveals the truth. That seems clumsy.’

‘Or suggests that Bosk, or Sark, or whatever he wanted to call himself, felt secure,’ replied Eisenhorn. ‘That he was confident he could not be found, even if someone was looking.’

‘If he lived here,’ said Drusher, ‘then he was happy to be known to his neighbours – neighbours like Esic Fargul – by his real name.’

‘Which reinforces my point,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘His neighbours knew his real name. He entertained and was not a recluse. He had influence and an influential circle of friends. The name of his property was known. Keshtre. Yet neither it nor he can be located. His disguise was casual, Medea, because he was clearly able to hide very well.’

‘You should look at his list of known associates, sir,’ said Voriet, sliding the data-slate towards his senior. ‘An influential circle of friends indeed –

artists, Administratum officials, men of science, senior military officers, at least one ex-governor of Gershom...'

'You see my urge for confidence now, marshal?' Eisenhorn asked Macks.

'That name in the third column, there, sir,' said Voriet, pointing to the slate. 'That was the one that caught my eye.'

'Goran Gobleka,' said Eisenhorn.

'Who's that?' asked Drusher.

'A recidivist,' said Eisenhorn. 'A man pursued for years by the Ordo Hereticus. A suspected member of the Cognitae. And the man that Thea Inshabel was looking for when she came here.'

'What is the Cognitae?' asked Macks.

'Some things must remain classified,' said Eisenhorn. 'The point is, we have a connection. A link between the elements. Sark resided in the Karanines. Thea's remains, and the others', were discovered in the area. Sark knew the man Thea was hunting. He may have offered sanctuary to his friend Gobleka, especially if his home was somehow impossible to detect.'

'Perhaps not so impossible,' said Drusher.

Eisenhorn stared at him. Jaff and Voriet looked taken aback.

'My turn,' said Drusher. 'When I encountered Esic Fargul in the woods yesterday, *however* I encountered him, he said that Keshtre was a fortress near here, but down towards the pass.'

'So you said,' said Voriet.

'We presumed he meant the Karad Pass, north of here, so that's the area we've been looking at,' said Drusher.

'And there's nothing here,' said Macks.

Drusher opened the old man's annotated text.

'Fargul was a keen observer,' he said. 'See, how he made notes? The little things he noticed? He also knew a good deal about local history. His family had lived here for a long time. In these margin comments, he uses the phrase "the pass" several times. I didn't notice it at first, because I assumed he meant Karad. But here, if you look, he refers to flocks massing at the pass before moving up into the hills.'

'So?' asked Jaff.

'If they were massing at the pass,' said Drusher, 'they would already *be* in the hills. Karad is north of us, deep in the range. He meant somewhere else. To Esic Fargul, "the pass" was something else.'

Drusher pushed the annotated text aside and opened the geographical history.

‘In fact,’ he said, ‘it’s so obvious it’s a little embarrassing. Here... “Unkara” is derived from the Old Fent word for crossroads. Unkara Town is a crossroads... because it was founded on the best navigational transit point south of the Karanines. It is a major pass between the Karanine foothills and the southern uplands. A more significant pass than Karad, in fact. We don’t think of it that way, because there’s a town there now, but to an older local man like Fargul, that would be “the pass” and would require no further clarification.’

‘So, we’ve been looking in the wrong area?’ asked Voriet.

Drusher nodded. ‘I believe we have. Keshtre is not north of us towards Karad, it’s south of us towards Unkara Town.’

Audla Jaff sniffed.

‘Interesting,’ she said. ‘But if that’s what you have to share, magos, it’s comparatively minor. You have used a paltry scrap of expertise to leverage far more information from us.’

‘Well,’ said Drusher, ‘that’s what good investigators do, isn’t it, Master Nayl?’

‘I think,’ said Nayl, covering his amusement, ‘we should go back to the maps and see what’s south of us.’

‘There’s nothing south of us either,’ said Jaff, annoyed.

‘Actually, I think there is,’ said Drusher. ‘I hadn’t finished, Mamzel Jaff. I happened upon this too.’

He put the third book in front of him. It was an old volume of a larger format, its green card cover faded by the years.

‘This was in the library,’ said Drusher. ‘It’s Esic Fargul’s sketchbook. He was carrying it the day I met him.’

‘Yesterday,’ Nayl reminded him.

‘Whatever day yesterday was, Master Nayl,’ said Drusher. He opened the book. Its pages were age-spotted and frail. Many loose leaves and sheets of paper had been stuffed into it, held between the covers by the tie ribbon. Drusher turned over drawings of the deep valley, of trees, of pools and tumbled stones, overgrown.

‘He liked this country,’ said Drusher. ‘He drew it a lot. Sometimes, the same location over and over. He liked the river. He also liked the old

fortresses. He made many studies of them. Especially the ruined ones. Look at this.'

He pushed one sketch onto the table so they could all see it. It showed two broken stones in a woodland clearing.

'The note at the bottom says "Ballion Fortress". It's clearly nothing more than a few stones. But to Fargul, it was a fortress still. Ballion is not on any of the maps, but it is listed in the indices of several histories as a Karanine fort. So, Fargul, with his love of local lore, knew the old sites even when published history had forgotten them. Now look at this one.'

Drusher spread the sketchbook open. It was a fine graphite sketch of a mountain pool, fed by three brooks and overhung on the rising side by huge blocks of tumbledown stone swathed in moss.

'I watched him draw this,' said Drusher. 'It's where I met him.'

Eisenhorn got up and limped around the table to Drusher's side. He hunched over, one hand on the tabletop, and studied the sketch.

'Your auto-séance, sir,' said Drusher. 'It did not conjure the old man from his grave at random. It conjured him to tell me something important. I just didn't know what until now. See what he wrote beneath the drawing?'

'*Ruins beside pool,*' Eisenhorn read out. '*Keshtre watch gate.*'

'I thought the old stones were a southern watchtower for Helter,' said Drusher, tapping the picture. 'But they are, in fact, a northern watchtower of Keshtre.'

'This was in the library all along?' asked Eisenhorn.

'Yes,' said Drusher. 'Sark really was Fargul's neighbour.'

Eisenhorn straightened up. For a second, he placed his hand on Drusher's shoulder. Drusher wasn't sure if the inquisitor was simply seeking support as he rose, or if he was fleetingly expressing some form of appreciation.

'This was in the library all along?' he repeated. He was looking at Audla Jaff.

'I thought you'd been through every book in the library, Mam Jaff?' asked Garofar.

'I hadn't got to every single volume,' said Jaff sharply. She restrained herself. 'I was working methodically. There were still a hundred or so volumes to be assessed. I clearly hadn't got to that one yet.'

She looked at Eisenhorn.

'My sincere apologies, sir,' she said. 'You know my work to be thorough and—'

Eisenhorn raised his hand.

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘Let’s find the house this ruined gate belongs to.’

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THIRTEEN

Gates of Keshtre

Drusher buttoned up his old coat and wandered into the yard to join the others. It was late morning, and the sun was out. Most of the party were checking their walking gear or their weapons. Eisenhower stood apart, talking to Betancore.

As he approached, Drusher overheard the end of their conversation.

‘I still say you need to rest and leave this to Voriet,’ Betancore was saying.

‘Not an option, Medea.’

‘Then at least give me a few hours to find a decent ATV to—’

‘I can walk. The ground is too steep and the forest too dense for a vehicle.’

‘Then I’ll walk with you every step of the way—’

‘No,’ Eisenhower said. ‘I want you at the landing zone, prepped. We may have need of heavier support.’

‘Gregor, we don’t have the sort of heavy support that—’

‘I know we don’t have *him*, Medea. Throne knows I wanted to bring him, but these days he’s too wayward. It would have taken all my effort just to keep him in line. We’ll have to manage without.’

Medea Betancore glared at her master uncertainly, then noticed Drusher approaching.

‘Magos,’ she nodded. She looked back at Eisenhower.

‘I’ll see you later,’ she said.

They left the gatehouse and walked down-range into the forest. The sun had raised a mist from the forest floor, and it fumed like smoke through the glades. Macks and her deputies led the way in a loose line, followed by

Nayl and Voriet, with Eisenhorn, Jaff and Drusher bringing up the rear. The progress was leisurely, mainly held back by the speed of the inquisitor's progress.

'You didn't have to accompany us, magos,' said Jaff.

'Well, I feel I've come this far,' replied Drusher lightly. 'I'd like to see the rest.'

'Do you know what the rest is?' she asked.

'No, mam, which is why I want to see it.'

'A man should sometimes be careful about what he wants,' said Jaff.

Jaff moved on ahead, leaving Drusher to keep pace with Eisenhorn.

'She's right,' Eisenhorn said. 'You may regret this, magos.'

'Because it's going to be dangerous, sir?'

'Yes,' said Eisenhorn. 'There is a chance you won't survive the experience. Or worse—'

'There's a worse?'

'Always. That you may survive it and wish you hadn't. That the memories will haunt you for the rest of your days.'

A redbeak trilled in a nearby tree.

'Tell me about the case,' said Drusher.

'The case?'

'Goran Gobleka. The Cognitae. I may as well *know* as much as possible, so I can be of as much *use* as possible. I'm hardly a security risk if I'm going to be dead or insane by the end of the day.'

'The Cognitae are a secret order,' said Eisenhorn. 'You might think of them as a cult, or coven. Their organisation is very old. It may even predate the founding of the Imperium. Certainly, in the last few centuries, it has enjoyed a resurgence in these subsectors. The Cognitae are a pernicious threat to the very foundations of our society. They are ruthless, and they employ dangerous levels of intellectual rigour.'

'What do they want?' asked Drusher.

'What does anybody want?' replied Eisenhorn. 'Power. Mastery. Control. They believe that the domination of our culture, and indeed the liberation of our species, lies in the use of forbidden knowledge. Lore that is heretical in nature and too dangerous for man to know. The secrets of the Archenemy, and the wisdom of the warp.'

'Do you mean... magic?'

‘That is a misleading term, but, like “ghost”, it will serve as far as you’re concerned. The Archenemy of man has the means to unlock and control the very fabric of reality. The Cognitae wish to acquire that ability for themselves.’

‘And you’re hunting them?’

‘One way or another, for most of my life, I have worked to eradicate their evil,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘In the last two decades, I have begun to unravel what I believe is a significant initiative on behalf of the Cognitae. An endeavour to achieve something of great magnitude.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know, magos. They hide well. They work in secret. They recruit very effectively. They establish secret scholams on many worlds, institutions where they raise and train prospective members, radicalising them in the process. I have uncovered several, and learned scraps. I piece those scraps together. Whatever they are working towards, it is momentous. Lilean Chase—’

‘Who’s she?’

‘A key member of the Cognitae. One of their adepts, brilliant and misguided. Perhaps their leader in this quadrant. My hunt is for her in particular. A heretic of the most toxic kind. My intelligence suggests she works towards, or perhaps for, something called the Yellow King. This may be a person, or an entity, or simply a condition... A state of power and enlightenment. She must be found and stopped.’

‘And this Goran man?’

‘One of the scraps, magos,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Part of the Cognitae network. He seemed lower priority, which is why I assigned Thea Inshabel to follow his trail. I fear she found something more. I fear Goran Gobleka was *not* low priority at all.’

‘This magic stuff...’ Drusher began.

‘Don’t dwell on it, Drusher.’

‘It is beyond my remit anyway, sir,’ replied Drusher, ‘but your man Nayl, he spoke of... uh... words of power. Words that can somehow break it.’

‘Words may break it, but they also form it,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘One of the Cognitae’s most cherished goals is to unlock and rediscover Enuncia. This is a language of power, a pre-human language, that can literally manipulate reality. Apart from a few words and letters, no one knows it entirely. Lilean

Chase has spent most of her life trying to decode it and build a working lexicon.'

'But you use it?'

'We use our enemies' weapons against them,' said Eisenhorn.

'So you're not above heretical knowledge yourself?'

'It is the curse of the ordos, magos. We need to know the Archenemy so we can prevail against him. That is why we stand in the shadows, why we walk alongside mankind and not as part of it. We are tainted by the knowledge we must use. It drives most of us to our dooms, eventually.'

'To your graves?'

'Or worse,' said Eisenhorn.

'Why do you do it?' asked Drusher. 'And don't say "because someone must" or anything like that.'

'Why are you a magos biologis, Drusher, when that calling has apparently given you a life you resent?'

'Because I'm good at it,' said Drusher.

'Yes,' said Eisenhorn. 'It's sad, isn't it?'

They reached the pool. But for the low blanket of mist in the surrounding area, it was much as Drusher remembered it from the previous day. Nayl, Voriet and the deputies went ahead to scout, leaving Macks and Audla Jaff with Eisenhorn and Drusher.

Eisenhorn limped to the old, mossy stones and began to examine them. He took off his gloves to run his bare hands across their surfaces.

Drusher watched the birds in the nearby trees for a while and counted off eight species. Then he wandered over to join Eisenhorn.

'Do they know you're hunting for them?' he asked.

'Who?'

'The Cognitae? This Chase woman?'

'Yes, magos.'

'And it would seem, from the fate of your poor associate Thea, they knew you had come close here.'

'It would.'

'Are you familiar with the white tile spider?' asked Drusher.

'Pretend I'm not,' replied Eisenhorn.

'It's small, but venomous. An arachnid. Black, but with a small white square on its abdomen, hence the name. Elusive. It is preyed upon by a number of small lizard species. It has a habit of killing greenback beetles,

which the lizards consider to be a delicacy. It does not eat the beetles. It leaves them dead, near its lair. This attracts the lizards, who feed on the beetles and slowly become paralysed by the venom the white tile has injected into their bodies. Once the lizards are helplessly inert, the white tile emerges and kills them. It kills and feeds upon its own mortal enemy, creatures many times larger and more powerful than itself.'

'That was an analogy, wasn't it?' said Eisenhorn.

'The bodies you've found here in the Karanines,' said Drusher. 'That appears to me to be the oddest fact of all. Whatever's afoot here, whatever secret endeavour, why leave them where they can be found? Why draw attention where no attention was being paid?'

'You think this is a trap, magos?'

'I think if you were hunting me, I'd want to find a way to stop that. You say the Cognitae are clever and devious. That thing that attacked us in Helter. Animated by a word of power, I have no doubt...'

'It was.'

'It seems to me that it was animated once we were all here together. You had been absent for days, and several of your staff were away recruiting me. Only when we all returned did it strike. Because we were there to be killed. Brought there by the mystery of the bodies.'

'Drusher,' said Eisenhorn, 'I am not worried that this is a trap. I am absolutely *certain* it is one. An effort I cannot ignore, too delicious to resist, intended to bring me to this place and end me forever.'

Voriet clambered back up the slope to join them at the edge of the pool.

'Sir, we've found the house,' he said. 'What's left of it.'



FOURTEEN

Shade Hall

The hunting party moved through the forest from the pool.

‘What did you find?’ Drusher asked Nayl.

‘A ruin,’ said Nayl. ‘Deep in the undergrowth. From the scale of it, it may have been a fortress, but nothing’s stood there for a long time.’

‘How long?’

‘Very long. Hundreds of years.’

‘That doesn’t fit the data we have,’ said Drusher.

‘That happens a lot in my line of work,’ Nayl replied. ‘Unless you’re prepared to scare yourself silly and believe it *does* fit the data. Just not the bits of the data you’re comfortable thinking about.’

‘Garofar’s shade hall?’ Drusher laughed, nervously.

‘I’ve seen worse things,’ said Nayl. He paused and reached into his backpack. He held out a small handgun to Drusher.

‘It’s the one I took off you,’ he said. ‘I took the liberty of cleaning it and loading it.’

‘Wasn’t it loaded already?’

‘These are better bullets,’ said Nayl. ‘Customised. From my special stash. I thought you might need something.’

‘I’m not really a gun person,’ said Drusher.

‘Do me a favour and take it anyway, magos,’ said Nayl.

The stones that had once been a fortress lay tumbled together under the trees, swathed in moss and climbing creepers. The mist hung heavy and still.

It had been a place of significant size. Some of the stone blocks were massive and suggested a heavy outer wall. But even these slabs, their edges

worn smooth by years of erosion, were half-buried in the loam. There was no longer even a sense of any ground plan that could be recognised.

‘If this is Keshtre,’ said Audla Jaff, ‘then Keshtre is not the site we are looking for. This isn’t just derelict. It has been vacant for hundreds if not thousands of years.’

‘Audla’s very pragmatic,’ Nayl said to Drusher, sidelong. ‘She likes to deal in facts. She’s not very taken with other possibilities.’

His grin suggested he was sharing a joke with Drusher, but Drusher didn’t find that reassuring. The idea that their speculation was correct, and some kind of supernatural truth lay beneath their immediate physical reality, was not reassuring.

‘I heard your comment, Harlon,’ Jaff said. ‘The information provided by Magos Drusher asserted that Keshtre had been occupied by Draven Sark and in use as recently as a few decades ago. But this intelligence was imparted as a by-product of an auto-séance. The warp lies and deceives. Its whispers cannot be trusted, or at least, cannot be understood on face value. The magos’ encounter with the ghost of Esic Fargul is open to many interpretations, not least that it was utter, ungrounded fancy.’

She walked through the undergrowth to a nearby tree and ran her hand across its bark, ‘This is a Southern Spur Pine, is it not, magos?’

Drusher nodded.

‘A mature specimen,’ said Jaff. ‘To reach this size, it would take... what? Three hundred years standard?’

‘At least,’ Drusher admitted.

‘Yet it – and others like it – are growing within the bounds of the site,’ said Jaff. ‘Keshtre didn’t collapse and perish in the last few decades. It has been gone long enough for three hundred-year-old trees to grow up through its bones.’

Eisenhorn glanced at Voriet, who was scanning the area with a portable auspex of a type Drusher hadn’t seen before.

‘Nothing residual, sir,’ Voriet said. ‘Nothing electromagnetic or ectomagnetic. No background psionics. Of course, this device isn’t as sensitive as you...’

The inquisitor nodded. He limped through the ruin a little way until he was standing a short distance from them. Then he stopped and closed his eyes.

Drusher and the others waited. Birdsong in the neighbouring glades died away to silence. The breeze stilled, and there was a palpable drop in air temperature.

‘Remain calm,’ Voriet whispered to Drusher, Macks and the deputies.

Macks looked deeply uncomfortable.

‘I’m going to circle the perimeter,’ she said. Voriet nodded, and Macks moved away quietly with Cronyl and Edde in tow. Drusher got the feeling she was simply finding an excuse not to be present.

It certainly wasn’t comfortable. Though the sun continued to wink through the tree canopy above, light in the glade had somehow dimmed to an eerie dusk. Drusher realised his breath was steaming slightly in the cold air. He saw frost dusting the tree trunks and the ground-cover leaves like powdered sugar. He looked up at the sun, twinkling beyond the leaves, to steady his nerves.

The light slowly returned, the temperature rose and birdsong resumed.

Eisenhorn sighed.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Well,’ said Jaff. ‘I propose we return to Helter and make a new plan.’

‘There are no birds singing,’ said Drusher quietly.

‘What, sir?’ asked Garofar.

‘Around this site,’ said Drusher. ‘No birdsong. You can hear it in the nearby areas, but not here.’

He gestured towards a stand of trees outside the limits of the old ruin.

‘I can see redbeaks,’ he said. ‘And little-tailed skeens. There, up in the branches there. See? But nothing comes this way. We’ve been here ten minutes, and I haven’t seen a single bird enter or cross this area.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Voriet.

Drusher shrugged and looked up at the sun again.

There was movement in the undergrowth, and Macks returned with the other two deputies.

‘There’s a track,’ she said. ‘A hundred metres that way. Looks like it runs all the way down from the mountain trail. It’s been in use. Wheeled vehicles, ATVs, I’d guess. Someone’s been visiting this place, often and recently.’

‘But the track runs out,’ said Edde, ‘ten metres short of the ruin. It just stops, then thick undergrowth.’

‘Well then,’ said Jaff, ‘the visitors – hunters, I imagine – came that close and no closer.’

‘There’s no turning circle,’ said Macks. ‘No crush marks or compressed vegetation at the end of the trail where a heavy vehicle turned around. I don’t know about you, Mamzel Jaff, but I don’t drive an ATV several kilometres down a very rough track and then just reverse back the way I came.’

‘Perhaps we put a watch on the head of the track?’ suggested Voriet. ‘See if these visitors come back?’

‘You’re very quiet, Drusher,’ said Eisenhorn.

Drusher was still looking up at the trees.

‘The trees are growing wrong,’ he said.

‘Expand,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘All the trees growing within the ruin site,’ he said. ‘They’re the same species as in the surrounding woods. But they have a slight inclination. You see it if you look. Growth patterning. It’s to do with the elements. Prevailing wind directions, angle to the sun in different seasons, soil, rainfall. Like the hair on a man’s scalp, growing in a natural pattern.’

‘I don’t really see it,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘It’s the sort of thing I’m trained to notice,’ said Drusher. ‘Trust me. The thing is, the trees on this site are all growing to a slightly different pattern. It’s subtle, but distinct.’

‘And what would cause that?’ asked Eisenhorn.

Drusher frowned.

‘It’s like...’ he began. ‘It’s like they are growing in a different environment. Responding to a different sun.’

Eisenhorn looked over at Garofar.

‘In the old stories for children, deputy,’ he asked, ‘how did an outsider find a shade hall? How did an outsider enter one?’

Garofar looked puzzled.

‘Well, sir, they just appeared,’ he replied. ‘You could enter them when they were there. Or you were taken there by the... the monsters who dwelt inside.’

‘Nothing else? No folk tale rhyme or incantation?’

‘I don’t know,’ Garofar said. ‘There was one story about a fellow who called one up. I suppose like an incantation. But I don’t know what words you’d use.’

‘Words...’ murmured Eisenhower.

‘Do you mean that language thing?’ Drusher asked.

‘I think experimentation would be ill-advised,’ said Jaff.

‘Your objection is noted,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Sark’s home was well hidden. Unnaturally well hidden. It was a place of retreat. Of escape. It was, in literal terms, occulted. This may be a false trail, or it may be that we are standing on the threshold of Sark’s hall. I’m not leaving until we have exhausted all possibilities of making a definitive determination.’

‘Sir, it is a considerable risk,’ said Jaff.

‘You said it yourself, Audla,’ replied Eisenhower. ‘The word Keshtre. You said the name translated as a “forbidden speaking place”, or “place of unholy speech”. If the Cognitae are hiding in the Karanines, they have built a place of seclusion and retreat, and proofed it against discovery using their darkest skills.’

‘I also stated that it’s not a physical location, sir,’ said Jaff.

‘Not at the moment,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Not all the time, perhaps. I’d like everyone to prepare themselves. If this works, even in part, there may be some discomfort and disorientation.’

Nayl gripped Drusher firmly and securely by the upper arm. Drusher looked at his hand in surprise.

‘What—’ he started to say.

‘Stick with me,’ Nayl said.

Jaff was objecting again. Eisenhower ignored her, raised his hands and said something.

It was a word, or at least it seemed to be. Drusher didn’t know it or understand it. He’d never heard it before in his life.

And he never wanted to hear it again.



FIFTEEN

Simultaneous Reality Overlays

‘Stick with me,’ said Nayl.

Drusher was clawing at his head with his fingers. There was a migraine-sharp knot of pain behind his eyes. He could smell blood in his throat. Nausea wallowed through him.

‘What?’ he said. ‘What? *What?*’

He heard Nayl again, saying his name. Nayl’s voice was obscured by the sound of a drum. Drusher realised it was the blood pounding in his ears.

‘What?’ he repeated frantically. ‘What did it mean? What did he say?’

He retched hard and fell, dry-heaving, onto the cold stone floor. His stomach was in spasm.

Nayl crouched beside him and patted him on the back.

‘Take it slow,’ he said. ‘You’ll level out in a moment.’

Drusher nodded. He couldn’t talk.

‘You all right?’ Nayl asked.

Drusher rocked back onto his heels and knelt, panting.

‘I don’t know what...’ he gasped, wiping his mouth. ‘That word. That sound. I don’t understand what he said. I don’t understand what the word was.’

‘Stay calm,’ said Nayl. ‘Take a few deep breaths.’

‘Why are you whispering?’ Drusher asked.

‘Just stay calm.’

Drusher shifted position, because the hard stone floor was digging into his knees...

Hard stone floor.

Drusher looked down and jumped to his feet with a startled cry.

‘Take it easy,’ said Nayl.

Drusher slowly looked around. The room was some kind of vaulted chamber of unusual height. The walls and arched ceiling were made of fashioned white stone. The floor was dark green marble. There were tall lancet windows of stained glass. Exterior light shafted into the room through the windows, covering the floor with a multicoloured pattern.

He looked at Nayl.

‘We were right,’ said Nayl.

Drusher shook his head.

‘Please tell me,’ he said, ‘that I passed out or something, and you took me back to Helter—’

‘No,’ said Nayl.

‘But we were in the woods,’ said Drusher.

‘And now we’re not,’ replied Nayl. ‘Except I think we are. We’re in the woods *and* inside Keshtre.’

‘Where are the others?’ asked Drusher.

‘Not sure,’ said Nayl. ‘But if we’ve appeared inside the hall, or it’s manifested around us... *whatever*... then...’

He gestured to the wall.

‘Macks and Jaff were over there. The others just beyond them. So... that wall appeared between us.’

‘I really can’t tell you how much I don’t like this,’ said Drusher.

‘I hear you,’ said Nayl. ‘Stay right here, and don’t touch anything.’

Nayl unslung his lasrifle and stalked towards the door.

Drusher clenched his fists to stop his hands trembling. He looked around. The air was cool, and there was a lingering background scent of promethium or some similar industrial petrochemical. The room was unfurnished, apart from an unmade wooden cot, a small chair and a blanket box. He walked over to the windows. There was light outside. The glow of it was dyed in greens and reds and golds by the stained glass. He had to stand on tiptoe to peer out.

He swallowed hard.

‘Nayl?’ he whispered. ‘We’re not in the woods.’

Germaine Macks closed her eyes and opened them again.

But it was all still there. She was standing on a metal walkway, suspended over fathomless darkness. Around her, in the gloom, huge mechanisms turned and whirred. Brass cogs many metres in diameter locked teeth with others of their kind, and turned in smooth and uniform

perfection. Smaller flywheels rotated rapidly, humming as they whirled. Iron pistons hissed pneumatic sighs, and copper valves opened and closed with automated regularity. The place smelled of oil and hot metal, like a vast machine shop.

‘This is real, isn’t it?’ she whispered.

‘I’m afraid so,’ replied Jaff. She was standing on the walkway beside Macks. She had drawn a small pistol.

‘We were in the woods...’ Macks began.

‘And now we are not, marshal,’ said Jaff. ‘I am as surprised as you are, but we must not give in to shock or disorientation. My master was right. We have been translated.’

‘Into what?’ Macks asked.

‘Into *where*,’ replied Jaff. ‘A sideways shift. The site of Keshtre evidently represents a bend in the geometry of dimensional reality, and we have stepped around that blind corner.’

‘This is...’ Macks started to say, but thought better of it. ‘What do we do?’

‘Keep our wits and find Eisenhorn,’ replied Jaff. ‘It is likely we are neither alone nor safe here.’

She moved along the walkway, her weapon ready. Metal steps led down to a lower gantry that ran beneath a section of huge, whirring cogs.

‘What is this machine?’ asked Macks, following her. She had her riotgun ready.

‘I’m not able to evaluate that at this time,’ replied Jaff. She held up her hand, suddenly, a signal for quiet.

Macks had heard it too. Voices, ahead of them. Macks and Jaff picked their way down the steps quietly. The lower gantry was quite broad. The mechanism purred both above and below it. At the far end, near a further set of steps, they saw Garofar and Edde.

‘Garofar!’ Macks hissed as loudly as she dared.

The two deputies turned at the sound of her voice, their weapons raised. They lowered them as soon as they saw Macks and Jaff, and came hurrying along the gantry towards them.

‘Thank the Throne!’ gasped Edde. She was clearly shaken, her mind unable to cope. There was shock in Garofar’s eyes too, but he was holding it together.

‘This is the shade hall, isn’t it?’ he said to Jaff.

‘It seems there was some basis to the myth, deputy,’ she replied.

‘Did we open a door?’ he asked. ‘How could this place be in the woods and we not see a trace of it?’

‘I want to go now,’ said Edde. ‘I want to go away from here, right now.’

‘We are still in the Karanine woods,’ Jaff said to Garofar, ‘and yet we are simultaneously *not*.’

‘What does that even *mean*?’ he spat back.

‘I could explain at great length about simultaneous reality overlays,’ said Jaff. ‘About areas of binary dimension. I imagine I would be wasting my time. Put simply, this is an extremely rare cosmic phenomenon. An extimate location. Two places occupying the same point of space at the same time, one overlaid on the other and only one of them ever visible at a time, depending on the position of the observer. This is the woodland ruins *and* it is this structure. We were in one, now we are in the other. Our location hasn’t changed. Our position of observation has. Does that help?’

‘No,’ said Garofar.

‘Then we have been taken through a faerie ring into your shade hall, deputy,’ Jaff said with contempt.

‘What do we do?’ Garofar asked Macks.

‘We get out of here,’ Edde replied, her voice rising in panic. ‘We get the hell out—’

‘Rein it in, Edde,’ said Macks. She got hold of the trembling deputy and almost shook her by the shoulders. ‘Edde? Edde! Look at me. Look at me now. I’m going to sort this out. I need you to keep a lid on, all right? Edde? Can you do that?’

Edde nodded, swallowing hard.

‘Y-es. Yes, mam.’

‘We need to find the others,’ said Jaff. ‘Eisenhorn, Nayl, Voriet, Magos Drusher and your other deputy. They may be nearby.’

‘We haven’t seen anybody except you,’ said Garofar.

Macks adjusted her collar vox.

‘Nayl, this is Macks? Do you copy? Cronyl? Are you reading me? This is Macks.’

She looked at Jaff.

‘The vox is dead,’ she said.

‘The frequency spectrum may be different here,’ said Jaff.

‘How do you know that?’ asked Garofar.

‘I don’t,’ said Jaff. ‘It’s just an educated guess.’

She turned and looked down the next set of metal steps. It descended to another platform. Other walkways branched off it. Steps led up to higher platforms, obscured by the humming machinery.

She looked at Macks.

‘Stay here,’ she said. ‘I’ll scout along here.’

‘We should stay together,’ said Macks.

‘I’ll be quick,’ said Jaff. ‘Stay here, and take a moment to get yourselves together. I’m going to need you to be able to focus.’

She turned and hurried silently down the metal steps. They watched her cross the lower platform then disappear from view behind slowly circling brass gears the size of banquet tables.

‘How long do we wait?’ asked Garofar.

‘Until she comes back,’ replied Macks.

‘What if she doesn’t?’ he said.

‘Let’s not get pessimistic,’ said Macks. She tilted her head towards Edde, who was twitching with unease, unable to stand still. Macks knew how the deputy felt. She wasn’t far off a panic attack herself. Her hands were shaking badly.

Garofar took the hint.

‘Come on, Edde,’ he said, trying to sound reassuring. ‘We’re going to be all right.’ He went to put his arm around her shoulders.

There was a sharp, wet pop, like a water bottle bursting. Garofar’s face was suddenly speckled with liquid. Edde sagged into him, heavy and limp.

He tried to hold her up. Her head lolled back, and a huge quantity of blood welled out of a hole in her throat.

‘Shooter!’ he yelled.

The second shot hit him in the ribs, knocking him aside. Garofar and Edde crashed over onto the platform together.

Macks dropped to her knees, her riotgun raised. There was no way in hell to tell where the shots had come from.

‘Drop it!’ a voice boomed.

‘Magistratum!’ Macks yelled, her weapon up to her cheek, hunting. ‘Go screw yourself!’

‘Drop it,’ the voice repeated. ‘The male is only wounded. He could be saved. But not if you resist.’

Macks glanced frantically at Garofar. He was sprawled on his back, blood bubbles popping as he opened and closed his mouth in silent shock.

Breathing hard, Macks slowly lowered the riotgun. She put it on the metal deck and raised her hands to show they were empty. Then she moved quickly to Garofar's side, and clamped her palms over the chest wound. There was blood everywhere. It was running through the platform mesh underneath Garofar, catching the light as it splattered away into the darkness.

Two people appeared, moving up the lower gantry towards Macks. One was a heavysset, bearded male in a chain-mesh combat jacket. The other was a slighter figure, a woman with tightly cropped red hair. Both were covering Macks with suppressed autorifles. Two more, both male, approached from the other direction. One was overweight and jowly, with thin grey hair. He carried an assault lasrifle with a modified scope and combat grips. The other was a very tall, thin man with neck and cheek tattoos. He covered Macks with a pair of laspistols.

The bearded man came up the steps to Macks as the other three kept back, covering her. He was swarthy, with jet-black hair. His piercing eyes were an odd, violet colour. He looked down at Macks.

'For Throne's sake! Help him!' Macks yelled, her hands locked flat over the wound in Garofar's torso.

'He's done for,' called the overweight man, edging closer, his weapon aimed. 'You can see that. But she's intact enough.'

'You said you'd help him,' Macks pleaded.

'I say all sorts of things,' replied the bearded man. 'Blayg is right. He's done for.'

'No! Get a bloody med kit!' cried Macks.

The man with the violet eyes sighed. He brought up his autorifle and puffed two noise-limited shots into Garofar's head.

Macks screamed and launched herself at the bearded man, clawing with blood-soaked hands.

He snapped his autorifle around like a club and met her face with the stock.

Nayl opened the door and looked out.

'You think you can be quiet now, magos?' he whispered over his shoulder.

'Yes,' said Drusher. He'd calmed down a little.

‘Follow me,’ said Nayl. ‘Stick with me. Do as I tell you.’

Drusher nodded.

Nayl looked at him, eyes narrowed.

‘Say it, quietly but clearly,’ he said. ‘I need to know where you are. I won’t be looking at you.’

‘I understand,’ said Drusher. ‘Yes.’

Nayl looked at Drusher for a moment, as if gauging how far he could trust him to behave. Then he appeared to make his mind up.

‘Follow,’ he whispered.

With the rifle up against his cheek, Nayl opened the door wider. Then, he switched his hand to the foregrip and edged out, panning the powerful assault weapon from side to side. Drusher followed him.

The door led into a long, high hallway. The walls were the same, seamless white stone as the room, the floor the same green marble. It was gloomy, and there was a constant, distant humming noise. Murky light seeped in through high window lights. The proportions of the hallway were odd. It was wide enough for three men to walk together, side by side, but the ceiling was so high, it felt narrow and confined. Drusher guessed the ceiling was five or six metres up. It seemed a curious choice, so much wasted space above head height. Despite the open air above him, he felt claustrophobic, oppressed by the blank, chalk-white walls.

Why build a corridor that shape? Was its grand architecture supposed to impress and intimidate? Then why so plain and austere? He was frankly glad the window lights were too high for him to see out of them.

His old adversary, imagination, decided to make mischief. The thought came to him that this *was* a very narrow corridor. A single-file passageway for very tall people. People so tall, they could see out of the high windows, because they would be at head height. And those tall people therefore wouldn’t *be* people at all...

‘All right?’ Nayl asked.

‘Yes,’ whispered Drusher.

‘You started breathing funny again,’ Nayl noted. He wasn’t looking at Drusher. He was prowling along the hallway, hunched, weapon aimed ready to fire. Drusher wondered why Nayl had chosen to go right instead of left. Both directions looked identical: the slender hallway advancing away as far as he could see.

‘Magos?’ Nayl prompted.

‘Yes,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m fine.’

He wanted to ask about the window. He wanted to ask Nayl about what he had seen through it. But it clearly wasn’t the time.

Nayl had looked through the window too. He had made no comment, as if the view had been what he had expected to see, or as if he’d seen it before. Drusher doubted both options. During their brief acquaintance, Drusher had come to know Nayl as a man who rarely registered any kind of reaction.

There was another door a few metres down on the right. Like the first, it was made of some kind of dense, pale wood, polished until it gleamed. The handle was silver.

‘Stay with me,’ said Nayl.

‘Yes,’ said Drusher.

‘First priority is to find the others,’ said Nayl. ‘I think they’ll be close. I think our positions will be relative to the ones we were in when we...’

He paused, thinking of the right word. Drusher was guessing ‘left’.

‘...were still in the woods,’ Nayl finished.

‘And if they aren’t?’ he asked.

‘Then I’ve got even less to go on than I hoped,’ said Nayl.

He reached the door. He listened at it for a moment, then turned the handle and let it swing open with a prod of his toe. He stepped in.

Drusher followed.

The room was identical to the one they had first found themselves in. A light Drusher now knew was not the sun, shone through stained glass-lancets. There was no cot, just four wooden chairs, arranged in a square with their backs together. There were marks made in blue chalk around the feet of the chairs, meaningless scribbles that were somehow unpleasant to look at.

Drusher found himself staring at them. One of the chairs was slightly out of alignment with the others and, driven by an obsessive compulsive urge, he reached out to straighten it.

Nayl’s big hand clamped around his wrist.

‘Don’t touch anything,’ he said firmly. ‘No matter how much you want to.’

‘Yes,’ said Drusher clearly. He had no idea why he’d felt so compelled.

He glanced fitfully at the stained-glass windows. Like the ones in the previous room, their pattern appeared random, purely decorative. Surely the

point of stained glass was to make a picture? The coloured panes were used to assemble an image: a saint, perhaps, or something symbolic. This was just a patchwork of green and red and gold shapes, fixed together with leading.

Except it wasn't. He stared. There were recognisable forms there. Figures. Elongated figures, swaying, with long intertwined limbs that—

‘Don't look at the windows either,’ said Nayl.

‘Yes,’ said Drusher, looking at the plain white wall instead.

‘They're not here,’ said Nayl. ‘They should have been on the other side of this wall if...’

He sighed, as though it were too much effort to finish, or too distressing to explain the context.

‘What does that mean, Nayl?’ Drusher asked.

‘It means we didn't bi-locate together,’ said Nayl. ‘Or we did, and we didn't arrive in our relative positions. Or we're not time synchronised. Or—’

He glanced at Drusher.

‘I'm just upsetting you now, aren't I?’ he asked.

‘No, I'm fine,’ said Drusher.

‘You sure? You made a noise. A sort of groan.’

‘No, I didn't,’ said Drusher.

‘I think you did.’

‘I think I'd know.’

‘I don't think you would.’

‘Nayl—’

‘All right,’ said Nayl. ‘This is a difficult experience, and your mind's not really focused yet. I can see the lost look in your eyes. That's all right. You'll get your bearings. But it's possible you groaned without knowing it, because this is all too much to take in.’

‘Are you finding it a difficult experience?’ asked Drusher.

‘Yeah,’ said Nayl.

‘Then you're hiding that well. Has this happened to you before?’

‘Not this exactly, no.’

‘Then something like it?’

‘I've had experiences,’ said Nayl. ‘Things like this that would scare you bloodless. But not this exactly.’

‘How do you deal with it?’

‘I’ve been dealing with it for years,’ said Nayl. ‘One thing I’ve learned, if you don’t deal with these kinds of situations quickly, you’re no good to anyone, including yourself.’

‘Insane adventures...’ murmured Drusher.

‘Exactly, magos.’

‘You weren’t lying.’

‘No,’ said Nayl. He flashed a quick smile that Drusher took as an attempt to be supportive. ‘For your sake, Drusher, I wish I had been.’

‘What do we do, Nayl?’ Drusher asked.

‘We keep looking. We keep looking for the others. It’s about all we can do.’

‘What about... Can you not say the word again? The word Eisenhorn said? Can’t you take us back?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Nayl. ‘I don’t know what he said either. Enuncia is beyond my pay-grade.’

Drusher breathed heavily and nodded. He walked over to the windows.

‘What are you doing? Magos?’

Drusher stood on tiptoe and looked through the stained glass. Nayl pulled him back.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said. ‘It made you cry last time.’

‘That’s why I have to,’ said Drusher. ‘You’re right. I’m lost. My mind’s all over the place. I’m not really coping. Which means I’m no use to you at all. The sooner I face up to reality and get it together, the better. Think of this as... aversion therapy.’

Nayl frowned, then let go of him. Drusher stood back up on his toes.

He saw the world outside through the coloured glass of the old window. No sunlit woodland, no forest glade, no blue skies, no cobalt edge of the Karanine ridge in the afternoon haze. No Gershom.

Outside was a grey desert. Dunes of dust stretched away as far as he could see, broken by outcrops of rock that looked like the calcified vertebrae of long-dead, leviathan creatures. A thin wind lifted powder from the crests of the dunes, winnowing it into the air like sea spray.

The sky was black and starless. A bone-white curve, like an immense tusk of light, rose from the horizon into the sky. It was a moon, or a close neighbour planet, rising in the sky in three-quarter shadow, impossibly close.

The black void sky had one feature: a blue-white whorl that radiated the light he'd first taken to be the sun's rays. The whorl was immense. A nebula, or some kind of stellar vortex, gleaming fiercely like the negative image of a black hole. Trailing arms of frosty light and energy clouds radiated from the heart of it.

It looked to Drusher like a vast eye gazing back at him.

Drusher let it look. He held its stare and returned it, unblinking.

Then he lowered himself onto his heels and turned away from the window.

'All right,' he said to Nayl. 'I have a little perspective now. I've got my head together.'

'You sure?'

'Positive, Nayl. Lead on. Let's find the others.'

Nayl hesitated.

'I only ask because... you groaned again.'

'I didn't,' said Drusher.

'I'm sorry, but you did. Involuntary I'm sure, but—'

Drusher held up his hand sharply.

Nayl had heard it too. A soft, stifled moan.

'I told you it wasn't me,' Drusher said.

'It came from the hallway,' said Nayl. 'Come on.'

'Just calm the hell down and let me think,' said Voriet.

Deputy Cronyl glared at him. His face was flushed, and he looked set to throw a punch at the interrogator.

'Please,' said Voriet softly. 'I know this is very distressing. I am fighting to process it myself.'

'But how can we be *here* all of a sudden?' Cronyl snarled.

'Just give me a moment,' said Voriet. 'Just a moment...'

He looked at the ancient machinery spinning in the twilight around them. Such an extraordinary device. Could it be? Could the rumours, the uncorroborated intelligence... Could they all have been true?

The heretic scum actually possessed this thing, and it was *working*?

This, he decided with a wince of grief, *this* secret was why Thea had died.

'Here's what we're going to do,' he said, turning to Cronyl.

Something slammed into Cronyl and flipped him. The deputy landed on the metal deck with a yowl of pain. A savage spin-kick connected with

Voriet's jaw, snapping him off his feet.

The attacker was a woman with severely cropped, red hair. Cronyl tried to rise, but she jerked down with a snarl and put a punch dagger through his spine. The deputy collapsed on his face, his body twitching, his last exhalation a long, slow, choking wheeze.

Voriet rolled, dragging out his Tronsvasse automatic. The woman kicked and deflected his aim. His shot went wide, the report echoing around in the darkness.

Voriet scrambled backwards on his rear, trying to re-aim. She lunged in and clamped his wrist with her left hand, twisting the pistol aside. He kicked out and took her legs away. She rolled as she fell, jerking his clamped wrist into over-rotation. Voriet gasped in pain. She locked her other hand around the bicep of his pinned arm and pivoted, hauling him head first over her and breaking his arm at the same time.

Voriet howled. The woman sprang up and stamped on his outstretched hand, breaking his fingers around the grip of the pistol. She kicked the gun clear of his useless hand.

He swung at her with his left fist, trying to ignore the overload of pain. She blocked the blow and drove a beak fist into his throat.

Voriet fell back, choking, eyes wide, unable to breathe, unable to rise.

The red-haired woman straddled his chest and stared down at him. She rested her beak fist against his brow.

'Submit,' she whispered, 'and the remains of your life will have a purpose.'

Voriet couldn't speak. He spat instead. Blood and spittle hit her cheek.

She hammer-tapped her beak fist against his forehead and bounced the back of his skull off the metal deck.

They followed the hallway to its far end. Nayl ignored other doors as they passed them. The sound was coming from up ahead.

As they approached, it grew louder. The constant background hum grew louder too. It wasn't a moaning. It wasn't someone in pain or distress. It sounded more like a voice unable to articulate. A voice that wanted to speak, and was trying to speak, but which had never learned any words.

Drusher thought of Macks, and the way she had been reduced to inarticulate gasps by the thing in the kitchen passage. Fear had done that to her. She had briefly been reduced to wordless terror by something that

defied her mind's ability to process it. But Germaine Macks was clever and sharp-witted, and she had a considerable and sometimes salty vocabulary.

This sound had a quite different quality. It was a human voice. It wasn't groping in fear, trying to find some words, the way Macks had been. It was vocalising in despair trying to *make* words.

Drusher took a moment to steady himself. Just thinking about Macks had made him upset. He wondered where she was. He wondered if he would see her again. He imagined her, wherever she was, being as scared now as she had been in the passageway.

It was a thought he could scarcely bear.

'Magos?'

He looked up. Nayl was beckoning to him.

There was a hatch at the end of the hallway. It was clearly Imperial tech, a heavy duty hatch like a shift-ship's air-gate. It looked incongruous, as if it had been retrofitted into the old, eerie architecture of the building.

Why would you put something that massive and secure into a place where polished wooden doors with silver handles were otherwise sufficient?

And if the answer to that question was security, what did you keep on the other side?

And why would you then leave the hatch wide open?

Drusher joined Nayl, and they peered in through the hatch.

The chamber beyond was vast and cylindrical. Drusher guessed it was the interior of one of the fortress' main towers. All the original floors and stairways had been removed. The curved walls soared up into darkness above them and dropped away into darkness far below.

The walls had been etched with lines. It was script. Hundreds of thousands of lines of writing, covering every centimetre of the interior walls, in perfect, uniform rows. It must have taken decades for skilled artisans to inscribe it all. Drusher wondered what it said. He was too far away to be able to read any of it.

The hatch led out onto a railed, metal landing inside the hall. The landing hung like a balcony under the hatch. Open metal steps led down to other platform stages below and several further above them. The platforms and connecting steps were all standard template units, Imperial build, the kind seen in manufactories and promethium plants and all manner of workspaces in human habitations across the Imperium. There was something oddly

reassuring about their familiarity, but, like the hatch, they seemed uncomfortably out of place in the setting.

Around them, filling the main space of the tower, was vast technology of another sort. This was the source of the constant humming. To Drusher, it looked as if someone had taken all the complex inner mechanisms of an antique mechanical timepiece, enlarged them, then slotted them carefully into the drum of the tower. Cogs, gears, springs and winders whirled and moved in perfect, oiled precision. The crude STC platform sections and steps had been suspended inside the vast brass mechanism, allowing access to it at different levels. On some platforms, powerful cogitator units and workstations had been bolted in place, connected by sheaves of cables and data wires to the Great Machine. Drusher saw their screens and displays flickering with bright lines of changing data: monitor positions from which to study and perhaps even operate the strange and ancient mechanism. The air was dry and smelled of metal filings, oil and warm power systems.

There was a large platform directly below them, a circular gantry fixed in the centre of the tower's interior. In the middle of it was a square iron cage, crudely heavy and filthy black.

Inside the cage was a man.

He was naked. His skin was dirty, scarred and blistered. His hair was long and ragged, and hung over his face and shoulders. He was kneeling on the floor of the cage, hunched over, trembling.

The guttural, moaning sounds were coming from him.

Nayl glanced at Drusher then led the way out onto the landing. His weapon was up and ready at his cheek. As they moved, he covered each angle and turn.

They edged down the metal steps onto the circular gantry. Drusher could smell the rank stench of the man in the cage. The sounds he was making made Drusher's skin crawl.

The man heard them approach, or smelled them. It felt to Drusher like an animal response. He looked up at them in terror. Drusher saw his wild eyes staring through the matted fringe of his hair. He murmured something and backed away into the far corner of the cage.

Drusher peered at him.

'Any idea who that is?' he whispered to Nayl.

Nayl was watching the hatch and the other platforms for signs of movement.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Not a clue. But it looks like the poor bastard’s been in there for a while, magos.’

‘Magos?’

They both looked around. The man in the cage was timidly rising to his feet, hunched, pawing the lank hair out of his eyes so he could stare at them. They saw a dirty, broken face that had been ravaged by years of pain and anguish.

‘M-magos?’ the man said. His mouth moved oddly as he spoke, as if he was working very hard to articulate. A man speaking a language that he had just learned, or which he had forgotten years before.

‘M-magos?’ he said.

‘You can speak?’ said Drusher.

‘Watch yourself,’ Nayl warned.

‘Magos,’ the man said. He edged towards them. ‘Magos,’ he repeated. ‘I am. I am. That is me. I am the magos. You know me?’

‘Do you have a name?’ asked Drusher.

‘Magos,’ the man replied with an anxious nod. ‘I... I am the magos. M-magos Sark.’

Nayl and Drusher glanced at each other quickly.

‘Are you Draven Sark?’ Nayl asked sternly. ‘Answer me. Are you Magos Draven Sark?’

The man nodded furiously. He was panting. Drusher saw a weird expression on his face. He was baring his teeth like a dog.

He was trying to smile.

‘W-w-w-will you let me out?’ he asked. ‘P-please. I am Dr-draven Sark. Magos Draven Sark, a-and I would like to c-come out of here now.’

‘It depends,’ replied Nayl. ‘Who put you in there?’

‘*He* put himself in there,’ said Jaff.

Nayl and Drusher turned around sharply. She was standing on the gantry beside them. She looked scared.

‘The hell did you come from?’ Nayl exclaimed.

Jaff gestured to the chamber around them.

‘I found this place. I’ve been looking around.’

‘Where are the others?’ asked Nayl.

‘I’m not sure,’ she said.

‘What do you mean *he* put himself in there?’ asked Drusher.

‘I’ve been trying to access data from the terminals in this chamber,’ she said. ‘It’s definitely a Cognitae facility, and it’s been here a very long time.’

‘How long?’ asked Drusher.

‘Never mind that,’ snapped Nayl. ‘Tell us about Sark.’

‘He didn’t build this place,’ replied Jaff. ‘But he’s run it for the Cognitae for the last century or so. Running its program.’

‘Program for what?’ asked Drusher.

‘I don’t know that yet,’ she replied. ‘But from the notes I found, it seems that Magos Sark was so desperate to get a result, he placed himself in that cage.’

‘Yes, because that’s what scientists do,’ said Drusher.

‘He made himself his own laboratory test subject,’ said Jaff witheringly. ‘He is clearly damaged and obsessive. That cage is a psychometric monitor, and Sark is his own lab rat.’

‘We need to know a lot more than that,’ said Nayl.

‘Well, I was working on it,’ said Jaff. ‘Then I saw you.’

Nayl lowered his rifle and looked around. He walked to the gantry rail.

‘Which terminal were you using, Audla?’ he asked. ‘Where did you get this information from?’

Audla Jaff raised her hand as if to point. But she was holding a compact, snub-nose laspistol.

She fired. The shot hit Nayl in the back. He lurched forwards, toppled over the rail and fell.

Drusher stared, his mouth wide open.

Jaff turned the weapon on him.

‘He was too dangerous to live,’ she said. ‘But you are containable. And new test subjects are always useful.’



SIXTEEN

The Bad Place

Jaff took a step towards Drusher and placed the muzzle of her sidearm against his forehead. Expressionless, she reached forwards with her other hand, and began patting the pockets of his old coat. She stopped, reached in and fished out the gun Nayl had given him.

She stepped back, keeping her weapon trained on him, and put the confiscated gun in the hip pocket of her jacket. Sark had hunched down in the cage, in fear, and was grunting and moaning again.

Over her shoulder, she called out 'clear' in a strong, loud voice. Her aim never wavered.

'How long?' Drusher asked her.

'How long what?'

'Have you been working against the ordos?'

'Since the day I was born, magos,' she said. 'I am the product of a Cognitae breeding school. I was engineered as a savant... Precisely the sort of exceptional individual a man like Gregor Eisenhorn finds appealing and useful. The sort of person he recruits.'

'I suppose that explains why you've been so unhelpful every step of the way,' said Drusher. 'Someone like you should have worked out Keshtre's location in a matter of hours. But you already knew where it was. You were trying to stop us finding it.'

She smiled.

'Your face is an open book, Magos Drusher,' she said. 'Micro-spasms in your platysma, zygomaticus and levator labii superioris. Involuntary dilation of the pupils. You are terrified. Your composure is a front. Bravado.'

‘My levator labii superioris is doing just fine,’ replied Drusher. ‘Of course I’m terrified. You just killed a man, and you’re aiming a gun at me. You realise your fate will be appalling. I don’t know what it will be precisely, but I doubt the Inquisition treats heretics with much mercy.’

‘It does not,’ she agreed. ‘But then, you’re not with the Inquisition. The Rot-God-King’s Holy Ordos have no inkling of this affair. Eisenhorn is a rogue, magos. He is extreme and dangerous, even by their standards. They declared him hereticus many years ago, and they hunt him as keenly as they hunt the Cognitae. There – the platysma *again*. You didn’t know that.’

‘I guessed,’ said Drusher. ‘This whole operation lacked legitimacy. I don’t know him well, but I believe he is determined–’

‘Oh, Eisenhorn believes his cause is just. In his arrogance.’

‘And he hunts for you?’

‘Bringing down the Cognitae is his life’s work,’ she said. ‘The ruthless zeal with which he pursues us is the main reason he was disowned by his ordo masters. Be clear, Magos Drusher. No one is waiting to hear from him. No one is coming to save you. No one knows you’re here. He’s done. You’re all done.’

‘You say that confidently, Mamzel Jaff, but you’re not certain, are you? A twitch of the masseter, a little tremble of the corrugator supercilii. Doubt, plain as day.’

Jaff frowned and shot her free hand to her face, involuntarily.

‘You’re a little shit,’ she said, glaring at him.

Drusher smiled back. He was no reader of micro-expressions. He’d made it up just to rattle her.

He heard footsteps. A man was coming up the metal steps onto the gantry. He was tall and heavysset, with piercing violet eyes that contrasted strangely with his olive skin, jet-black hair and full beard. He wore a leather-jack suit with a mesh-armour jacket. A large autorifle hung across his shoulder. Three people followed him: a hard-faced woman with cropped red hair, a tall, heavily tattooed man and an overweight man with hooded eyes.

‘Why is he alive, Jaff?’ the bearded man asked. His voice was extraordinarily deep.

‘A useable subject, Gobleka,’ she replied. ‘High intelligence quotient.’

The man looked at Drusher as if he were an annoying stain on good carpet. *Gobleka*. Drusher recognised the name. The heretic Eisenhorn’s

interrogator had been hunting on Gershom.

‘Have you questioned him?’ Gobleka asked Jaff.

‘He knows nothing.’

‘Establish that as a fact,’ hissed Gobleka. ‘Thanks to your poor work, the agents of the damn ordos are *inside* the hall. I want them all found and extinguished, so we’d better know everything they know.’

Drusher saw the look on Jaff’s face. That was a micro-expression he understood. Jaff was terrified of Gobleka. Drusher had no doubt this stemmed from Gobleka’s imposing physicality and charming manners, but he was also sure Jaff had something to prove. She hadn’t sprung the trap and killed them all cleanly at Helter. She’d let them get inside Keshtre. She was clearly keen to demonstrate her competence and make up for the error. Drusher doubted the Cognitae offered much in the way of second chances to those in their service.

‘Where’s Eisenhorn?’ Jaff asked, her weapon still aimed.

‘I don’t know,’ said Drusher.

‘True?’ asked Gobleka.

‘Yes,’ said Jaff. ‘He couldn’t cloak a response to that question.’

Gobleka nodded.

‘Take him down to the cellar cages,’ said Gobleka.

Jaff hesitated.

‘What?’ Gobleka asked.

‘Can’t Blayg or Streekal do it?’ she asked.

‘Do it your bloody self, Jaff,’ sneered the overweight man.

‘I want to get back out,’ said Jaff to Gobleka. ‘Betancore is outside. The remaining loose end. I need to deal with her, and I’m the best choice to get close to her.’

‘Put him away. Then you can go,’ said Gobleka.

Jaff looked at Drusher and gestured with her gun.

He went where she told him to go. Jaff walked behind him, covering him with her weapon. They descended from the gantry and followed a route down the tower, crossing platforms and walking down suspended staircases, the brass wheels and gears of the Great Machine whirring around them. Drusher tried not to feel alarm at the immense drop below them: his good old fear of heights. A gun at his back served to focus his mind.

‘What does it do?’ he asked.

‘Shut up,’ she said.

‘You’re making something. This machine, it’s very old, isn’t it?’

‘Drusher, you’re not *that* useful. Shut up.’

Drusher felt an odd tingling sensation in the base of his skull. He stopped walking and leaned on a handrail.

‘Keep walking,’ she said.

‘Just a minute,’ Drusher said. ‘I feel faint.’

He looked out at the machinery, at the other platforms and walkways. He looked at the shadows, hoping...

The tingle throbbed in the back of his head.

He straightened up.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I feel better now.’

He looked at Jaff and gestured at the Great Machine.

‘Come on, how old?’ he asked.

She jabbed the gun in his ribs.

‘Walk,’ she hissed.

‘You can’t blame me for being fascinated, mamzel. It’s my job to enquire. My life’s work.’

‘As of now, you have no life.’

He looked around, thoughtfully.

‘These... *tests*. What is my fate going to be, Audla?’

She frowned at him.

‘Painful,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ he shrugged. ‘That’s a shame. I really don’t do pain well. What sort of pain?’

‘Walk,’ she snapped.

‘Seriously, so I can brace myself...’

She put the gun against his forehead again.

‘Be obedient,’ she said. ‘Shut up and walk. You are very annoying.’

‘So I’ve been told,’ said Drusher. ‘You know, I don’t think I *will* walk any more. I think, on balance, I’d rather die than submit to these tests you mentioned. I’m not good with pain. I’d rather it was quick.’

He closed his eyes.

There was a sharp crack.

Drusher opened his eyes again. Audla Jaff’s limp body lay at his feet.

‘You took your time,’ Drusher said. ‘I didn’t know how much more crap I could come out with to keep her distracted.’

‘You did just fine,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Have you killed her?’ Drusher said.

Eisenhorn hunched over her body.

‘Not yet,’ he said.

‘She killed Nayl,’ said Drusher.

‘She has betrayed me on every level,’ replied Eisenhorn. He searched Jaff’s pockets, found Drusher’s gun and held it out to him.

‘I was actually quite pleased to see the back of that,’ Drusher said.

‘Take it, magos. You need to be armed. I think we’re the only two left.’

Drusher took the gun reluctantly.

‘I heard you whisper in my head,’ he said. He rubbed the back of his skull. ‘Right in the back there. It was unpleasant.’

‘I had to signal to you without her hearing,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I had to get you to stop so I could get close. I didn’t want to risk a shot. It wasn’t easy.’

‘Why?’ asked Drusher. ‘What do you mean?’

Eisenhorn let out a long, slow breath. Drusher could see that his flesh was pallid, and he was perspiring.

‘This place,’ he confessed, ‘this... machine. It’s interfering with my mind. It’s radiating a latent power that’s conflicting with my psykana gifts. It’s taking more effort than usual to use them. And when I do, I can manage short range only.’

‘Then don’t,’ said Drusher. ‘You’ll exhaust yourself.’

‘I’ll use what I have to, magos,’ Eisenhorn replied, ‘*when* I have to. For as long as I can. My gifts are about the only edge we have over the Cognitae.’

‘What is this machine, inquisitor?’

‘I’m not certain,’ replied Eisenhorn, ‘but I think it’s a device called an Immaterium Loom.’

‘Which is?’

‘It spins things out of the warp,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘It binds the etheric with the physical. There have been rumours for centuries that the Cognitae were trying to build one. I didn’t give those rumours much credence, but yet again the Cognitae dismay me.’

He hoisted Jaff’s limp body upright and glanced at Drusher.

‘Can you support her? It’ll only be for a moment.’

Drusher moved forwards to help.

‘Immaterium Looms are volatile things,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘No one’s ever made one before, though many have tried over the millennia. Heretics and

Imperial adepts alike. All prototypes have built up interference patterns with the fabric of reality and imploded.'

'But this place... it isn't reality?' asked Drusher, propping Jaff upright.

'As usual, you're sharp,' said Eisenhorn. 'This place, Keshtre, is a weak point in the fabric between our reality and the warp. I think it always has been... a liminal place of monsters, feared by the ancient Udaric tribes who gave it its ominous name, becoming part of folklore, as all such bad places do. The Cognitae have exploited this weakness in real space fabric and built this place in the in-between.'

'To hide?'

'Yes, and now I know they can do it, I realise they may have other such boltholes across the Imperium, in *other* bad places. Which is why they have always been so damned elusive. But here, there is a secondary purpose.'

'Because we're in the warp?' asked Drusher.

'We're in an interstitial space between reality and the warp,' Eisenhorn replied. 'It's called an extimate zone. But yes. It is a laboratory-perfect environment in which to build an Immaterium Loom and set it running without risk of real space contamination interfering with its function.'

'That's all speculation, I take it?' asked Drusher.

'For now. Let's ask Jaff about it,' said Eisenhorn. 'Hold her.'

He stepped back.

+Audla.+

Drusher shivered. He felt the woman quiver in his arms. Her head snapped upright.

'Should you be doing that?' he asked nervously. 'I mean, if your powers are limited and—'

'I need information,' said Eisenhorn. 'Let her go and step away.'

Drusher moved to Eisenhorn's side. Audla Jaff was standing upright, clenched stiffly and awkwardly. Her eyes were open, but she was looking at nothing.

'Please...' she whispered.

+I trusted you.+

Frost crystals began to form on the metal decking around her feet.

+You brought us into a trap.+

'You brought yourself, Eisenhorn,' she whispered. 'Inshabel sniffed out the traces of our work here on Gershom. It was an ideal opportunity to entice you here and remove your persistent opposition.'

+A trap. To silence me.+

‘And your retinue,’ she said. ‘All loose ends.’

+You never expected us to get inside this place, though, did you? You meant to kill me... all of us... at Helter.+

Jaff’s eyes narrowed.

‘You got further than expected,’ she said. ‘Thanks to Drusher. I animated the revenant at Helter, but it was not sufficient. I was regrouping to make another attempt. You pushed on despite my efforts to divert you. You opened Keshtré’s doors. But we have adjusted. We improvise well.’

‘Is this the truth?’ Drusher whispered to Eisenhorn.

Eisenhorn was concentrating hard. He looked sick. His cheeks were flushed, and there was sweat on his forehead.

‘She can’t lie,’ he grunted. ‘Not given the psionic coercion I am using.’

‘Is Macks alive?’ Drusher asked Jaff. ‘Have you killed her? Have you killed the others?’

‘Don’t interrupt,’ snapped Eisenhorn. He was struggling to focus.

+Is this an Immaterium Loom?+

‘Yes.’ Jaff shivered, every word tight and unwilling.

+How long has it been here?+

‘Sixteen centuries, since it was built. Watched over by a succession of magi.’

+Of which Draven Sark is the latest?+

‘The greatest. He found his grandfather’s samples. The Torment. The Chaos disease. From it, he refined an inoculation. A viral enhancement that would render test subjects immune to etheric corruption. Thus they might withstand the first stages of transformation by the Loom.’

+Has this worked?+

‘There is a high wastage of test subjects,’ said Jaff. Drusher could see the horrified look in her eyes. She was fighting not to say these things, and they were coming out anyway. ‘A high wastage. But the process has now worked. It worked on Sark. Such devotion. Such self-sacrifice. Such perfection. He has made it work. He has made it work the way Lilean wanted it to.’

+To do what?+

‘To construct vessels,’ gasped Jaff. Blood was beginning to seep from her left nostril. ‘Flesh is weak. What we wish to accomplish surpasses the limits of the human form. We are building *better* vessels. Vessels that can survive

the stresses involved. We call them graels. They are precious, but hard to make.'

+I have met a grael before. Grael Ochre.+

Jaff shook as if the name hurt her.

+It said it was the Yellow King. Or that it served the Yellow King.+

'It does,' whined Jaff.

+And Orpheus? Is that this King's name?+

'Please stop this!' she wailed. Drusher glanced at Eisenhower in alarm. Eisenhower was trembling. His lips had peeled back to reveal his clenched teeth. He looked to be in as much pain as Jaff.

+Tell me.+

'Lilean is making the grael vessels to serve the King in Yellow,' she moaned.

+And they are vessels for what?+

'To contain the truth of the warp. To be strong enough to speak not one word of Enuncia, but all the words. A fluency in the first language that would shatter human form.'

+Like daemonhosts? But in reverse? A human soul wrapped in an etheric body, rather than an etheric force bound in human flesh?+

'Exactly. They are eudaemonic beings.'

+ 'Good daemons'? I would take issue with your terminology.+

Jaff snorted, amused. Blood bubbled at her nostrils.

'They are the future and they are hope,' she said. 'Through the graels, the truth may be whispered in the ear of the Rot-God-King and end His domination.'

'Well, that makes so much sense now she puts it like that,' said Drusher.

'Please be quiet,' said Eisenhower with considerable effort. Jaff was starting to tremble. Blood dripped from her nose, and the drops froze in the ice around her feet.

+How many has he made? How many of these graels has he built?+

'The f-first eight. Th-they have gone to the Yellow King to be deployed.'

+Where?+

Jaff coughed. Blood frothed over her lip. Blood was dribbling from her nose and running from her tear ducts.

'Please stop...' she spluttered.

+WHERE?+

'Qu-queen Mab.'

+Where is that?+

‘S-sancour, i-in Angelus.’

+Where is Lilean Chase?+

Jaff began to choke.

+Where is she?+

Jaff was quivering wildly. She vomited blood down her front.

+What is the King in Yellow?+

‘P-p-please...’ Jaff gurgled.

Her left eyeball burst.

‘Is Macks alive?’ Drusher yelled.

She shrieked the word ‘yes’ as she died.

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SEVENTEEN

One Word

Drusher turned away. He leant on the platform's rail and stared at the slowly turning cog systems of the Great Machine. He didn't want to be sick. He was afraid that if he started he wouldn't be able to stop.

'That was barbaric,' he said quietly.

'It was necessary,' replied Eisenhorn, his breathing ragged and rapid. 'And Jaff was a heretic. A murderer. A traitor to me.'

Drusher turned around slowly. Eisenhorn was crouching over Jaff's steaming remains.

'No one deserves that,' Drusher said.

'You have lived a very sheltered life, magos,' said Eisenhorn. 'This galaxy is more cruel and dangerous than you can imagine. When you fight against it, you cannot afford to be sentimental or squeamish.'

'I know about you,' said Drusher.

'I resent your interruption,' said Eisenhorn. 'I was interrogating, at great cost to myself. There were a few seconds left. You jumped in with your question—'

'I needed to know about Germaine—'

'You are fond of the marshal,' said Eisenhorn. 'I understand. You must understand she is an insignificant part of this. So are you, and so am I. Your sentiment betrays you. A life or two, a hundred, a thousand, they are collateral in this war.'

'I am quite content to remain a creature of sentiment for the rest of my life,' replied Drusher. 'I am very glad I am *not* like you. I told you, I *know* about you. You chose to ignore the remark.'

Eisenhorn rose to face him. He looked drawn and deathly pale.

'What is it you think you know, magos?'

‘You are no inquisitor,’ said Drusher. ‘Perhaps once, but not now. You are a rogue, disavowed by your own kind. Whatever war you are waging, whatever quest you’re on, it’s yours alone. You are not sanctioned. There is no official support.’

‘There is truth in that,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘But it only serves to demonstrate that the Holy Ordos don’t appreciate the extremity or scale of this threat. I have warned them. They have ignored the warning. Therefore, I must act alone, or no one will stand against it.’

‘But it bothers you,’ said Drusher. ‘You lied. You and Voriet, you maintain the pretence that you are of the ordos. That you still have that authority. You used that lie to recruit me and to drum up the support of Macks and her deputies.’

‘The rosette of the Inquisition has clout,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘It has influence. You would not have assisted me otherwise... or it would have taken a great deal more persuasion. The guise of inquisitor is expedient in my work.’

‘So it’s a useful lie? That’s all you have to say on the matter?’

‘No, actually.’ Eisenhorn looked at him. There was a fierce gleam in his eyes. ‘I am an inquisitor. It has been my life. I know I am true in the defence of the Golden Throne. If the echelons of the Inquisition, and the other august institutions of the Imperium choose – in their ignorance – to deem me otherwise, then it is *they* who are wrong, not me.’

‘One might describe that as a terrifying level of self-delusion, sir,’ said Drusher.

‘You can describe it however you like, magos,’ Eisenhorn replied.

He glanced over his shoulder.

‘Someone’s coming,’ he whispered. ‘A psykanic event like this... and Jaff’s screams... will not have gone unnoticed.’

Drusher followed Eisenhorn across the platform. He didn’t really want to, but he wanted to stay put even less. He glanced back at Jaff’s remains.

‘Do we just leave her there?’

‘Hurry,’ Eisenhorn replied.

They moved down some steps to the next platform stage and hid in the shadows of one of the great cogs. From concealment, they could see the stage they had just left. Eisenhorn reached into his coat and drew a large and ornate autopistol. It looked the size of a standard carbine to Drusher.

‘What do we–’ Drusher began.

+Remain silent.+

A man appeared on the platform above. It was the tall man with florid tattoos that Drusher had seen before. He hurried to Jaff's body, recoiled in disgust, then anxiously began to look around, a laspistol raised.

'Blayg!' he called.

The heavy man appeared a moment later, out of breath.

'What did you find? What was that cry?' he asked.

'Jaff's done for.'

'Damn,' the fat man gasped, seeing the corpse.

'Eisenhorn's handiwork,' replied the tattooed man. 'He's here, and he's loose.'

'What did he do to her?' the fat man asked, tilting his head in ghastly fascination as he stared at Jaff's body.

'Who cares, Blayg? We have to find him before he does worse.'

'Streekal's already hunting,' said Blayg, running a pudgy hand through his thin grey hair. He hefted up the heavy combat las he was carrying.

'Streekal's efficient, but she'll need help,' replied the tattooed man. 'This bastard is as dangerous as his reputation suggests. Go up to the cage. Tell Gobleka what's happened.'

'He'll be furious, Davinch.'

'Of course he will. So tell him gently.'

Davinch, the tattooed man, glanced at his portly colleague.

'Go on!'

'Where are you going?' Blayg asked.

'I'll check down from here,' said Davinch. 'Right down to the cellar. I want to see if Jaff put that magos fool in a cage before this happened to her. Otherwise, we've got *two* interlopers loose. And tell Gobleka someone needs to get outside. There's the other loose end, the Betancore woman. She needs to be tidied up too.'

Blayg nodded. He walked away and began to climb the steps.

'Hurry!' Davinch shouted after him. 'Gobleka may even want to request an outside assist to get this squared away.'

Blayg disappeared out of sight. Davinch had drawn both pistols. He circled the platform and began to move towards the steps close to Eisenhorn and Drusher.

Eisenhorn placed a hand on Drusher's arm.

Drusher felt an uncomfortable psykanic tap. The tattooed man suddenly looked around as if he'd heard someone call his name. He made off in the opposite direction and quickly vanished behind the gears of the Great Machine.

'You could have shot him,' said Drusher quietly.

'I could,' said Eisenhorn, 'but I don't want to bring the whole place down on us. We are the last two, Drusher. Silence and shadows are our friends.'

'Our friends while we do *what* exactly?'

'He mentioned Sark. And Gobleka.'

'I've seen them both,' said Drusher. 'A long way above us, there's a cage on a gantry. A psychometric monitor. Is that the right term? Magos Sark is in it. Caged like an animal. He's become the... I don't know... focus of this machine. He's part of it. It's working because of him.'

'So Jaff said.'

'But his mind is gone,' said Drusher. 'He's very damaged. This Gobleka fellow, he seems to be the one running the operation now.'

'Goran Gobleka is an expert fixer. The Cognitae value his skills. But Sark is the primary target. We have to stop him. Stop this Loom manufacturing any more graels for the King in Yellow.'

'I didn't understand any of what Jaff told you,' said Drusher. 'What are they trying to achieve?'

'I don't expect you to understand, magos,' Eisenhorn replied. 'Frankly, I don't want you to understand. But so you grasp the vital nature of this, the Cognitae – through the King in Yellow – are working to bring down the Imperium. I believe their goal is no less than the assassination of the Emperor. So when we are done here, I will go to the Angelus Subsector, to Sancour, and I will find this place called Queen Mab, and, there, I will hunt down and destroy the King in Yellow. But first, this place must be ended so it can construct no more monsters to serve his scheme.'

Drusher nodded. 'Then let's get Macks and—'

'She's not a priority,' said Eisenhorn.

'She's alive, Eisenhorn.'

'And I'm sorry for that. But she is not the priority here, magos.'

'We can't just leave her—'

'We can.'

'No,' said Drusher. 'I can't.'

'Magos, do you still not understand the importance of—'

‘I do,’ interrupted Drusher firmly. ‘But as you took pains to point out, I am a creature of sentiment. I won’t leave my friend to die. You can help me, or you can get on with waging your private war. I’m going to the cellars. I think that’s where she may be. If you come, we can get it done quickly, then we can *both* help you deal with Sark.’

‘There isn’t time,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Then off you go, and good luck to you,’ said Drusher.

Eisenhorn glared at him.

‘Don’t try and pull rank,’ said Drusher. ‘You’re not an inquisitor, and I’m not one of your lackeys.’

‘You are a very aggravating man, magos,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘One of my few real skills. Tell me, did you suspect Jaff?’

‘I suspect everyone,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Hence the levels of secrecy and confidence you exhibited at Helter. Telling no one anything. Sharing nothing. You don’t trust anyone do you?’

‘I can’t afford to, magos.’

‘I pity you,’ said Drusher.

‘I trust those I’ve known a long time,’ said Eisenhorn quietly. ‘Medea... Nayl...’

He fell silent as he spoke the name. Then he glanced back at Drusher.

‘I was sure there was a spy in my company,’ he said, ‘even before I arrived on Gershom. That is why I kept things classified. I thought it was Voriet.’

‘Voriet? Really?’

‘He was interrogator to Inquisitor Cyriaque. He is genuinely an officer of the ordos. He came to me two years ago, saying that he wished to join me, that he believed in my cause and felt that the ordos were blind to the real threat. In effect, he went rogue and joined me.’

‘But you didn’t trust him?’

‘Voriet is very able and was a decent addition to my party. But no, I never trusted him. I believed him to be a double-agent, claiming to be a renegade, but sent by the ordos to infiltrate my operation.’

‘Yet you kept him close?’ asked Drusher. ‘You didn’t kill him *just in case*?’

‘Voriet was useful, and he’s a good man,’ replied Eisenhorn. ‘I was aware of his true loyalties, so I treated him warily. But I hoped... I hoped that if I

let him work with me, he might see the truth. He might become convinced of the danger. That the threat was genuine.'

'And side with you for real?' Drusher paused. 'No, you wanted more than that, didn't you? You hoped that he would report to his masters in the ordos and convince them your cause was true. Convince them that you were no rogue. He was your way back *in*. Your chance to be accepted back into the folds of the Inquisition.'

'You are astute.'

'It's so ironic, sir,' said Drusher. 'Ironic to the point of comedy. You suspect everyone. You believe there's a spy in your midst. You think it's Voriet, perhaps correctly, but you use him for your own ends, to rebuild the bridges you burned with the Inquisition. And then the *real* spy turns out to be Jaff. Not just an agent of your ex-masters but, worse, an agent of your true enemy.'

'She hid it well. That's what the Cognitae do.'

'You hate that the ordos cast you out, don't you?' asked Drusher. 'You hate the fact they declared you a heretic?'

'I hate the fact that the ordos are blind and stubborn,' replied Eisenhorn. 'I could achieve a great deal more, a great deal faster, if I had their blessing, their cooperation and their not inconsiderable support.'

'Or... you have no friends and you don't like it,' said Drusher.

'Pure sentiment,' Eisenhorn responded.

'Well, I have a friend, and I'm going to help her.'

'This is a dangerous location, magos, and you are no combatant. You don't have the skill-set to do her any good.'

'So *help* me,' said Drusher.

'No,' said Eisenhorn. 'Macks is not a priority.'

'That there, sir, is *why* you don't have any friends,' said Drusher. He turned away. 'I'll go do whatever I can. You go do what you need to do. I hope this isn't goodbye, but I think it probably is, and so I wish you well in your efforts.'

He walked down the platform and began to descend the stairs. Eisenhorn stood and watched him for a while. Then turned, limping painfully, and disappeared in the opposite direction.

Drusher stopped and looked back. Eisenhorn was gone.

'Throne,' he muttered to himself. He had been quite sure Eisenhorn was going to change his mind and come after him. The old bastard really was as

cold as stone.

And now Drusher was alone. He had no clue what he was going to do or how he could achieve it. Eisenhower had been right. Valentin Drusher was no fighter. He wasn't going to last a second against any of Gobleka's ruthless minions.

He was way out of his depth. He had been since the moment Harlon Nayl had hammered on his front door.

He continued down the steps. For what little good it might do, he took the gun out of his coat pocket and clutched it tightly.

It took a while to reach the base levels of the tower. Longer, in fact, than Drusher fancied it should have taken, as if the tower were much taller than any real tower could be, as if its dimensions stretched down into impossible depths.

He moved slowly, hugging the shadows, flinching every time a metal step or platform panel creaked under him. The constant movement and whirring of the huge Loom's gears around him kept making him start. He jumped at every shifting machine part, imagining each motion to be the movement of some Cognitae henchman stalking him.

Finally, he climbed down through the huge, wrought-iron girder frame that supported the weight of the Loom. The frame was as substantial as a major road bridge, and its fabric was built into the walls of the tower. Further high-tension steel cables were cross-anchored around the frame to support the immense weight.

Looking down from a catwalk that ran under the heavy frame, Drusher saw a platform built out from the tower wall in the void beneath. It was large, ragged and uneven, a patchwork of steel plates and flakboarding. It looked like part of the hull-skin of an old ship that had been peeled away and repurposed as flooring. Where it extended out over the void, it sagged and became more frayed, its feathered edge dangling above the darkness below.

Below it, the tower walls continued down into the dark still further, but Drusher could see a glint in the blackness that suggested the very base of the tower was filled with promethium, or some other dark, viscous fluid. Beneath the level of the great iron frame, everything was slightly sheened with oil, every surface tacky with a fine, brown stain. The Loom had run, so Jaff had said, for centuries. Precision engineering required lubricant to keep it moving smoothly. Drusher imagined the constant tending and attention

the Loom above him had received over the years, the regular application of lubricant and grease to the gears and cogs. Movement and gravity combined to gently remove the lubricant from the Great Machine, and this is where the residue ended up, draining into a sump in the tower's base, a deep well of pooling waste oil.

There was a row of cages on the ragged platform. They looked like the metal box cage that had contained Sark: six cages, placed against the tower wall. Nearby was a small laboratory station, an old auto-medicae unit and some metal storage bins. The whole area was gloomy, lit only by dozens of fat candles ranged around the platform and the work area. It looked uncomfortably like a shrine, like a place of unwholesome ritual.

By the flickering yellow light of the candles, Drusher could see that two of the cages were occupied. He moved around for a better look. A rough metal staircase ran down from the catwalk to the edge of the platform. The hunched figure in one of the cages was Germaine Macks. A crumpled body lay in the cage beside her. The floors of the other cages were littered with blackened human bones.

Drusher crept to the head of the stairs. There appeared to be no one else around. His heart racing, he climbed down the stairs.

Macks looked up and saw him as he stepped onto the platform. She lurched to the front bars of the cage and peered out at him.

'Valentin? Oh Holy Throne! Valentin!'

He smiled at her and put his finger to his lips. The pistol was still in his hand. He put it in his pocket and shushed her properly.

'Keep your voice down, Germaine,' he hissed.

He hurried over to her cage. She looked up at him with wild eyes. She was filthy, and the side of her face was swollen and badly bruised. He knelt down and looked in at her. She grabbed his hand through the bars.

'What did they do to you?' he asked.

'Hit me,' she said. 'Clubbed me with a rifle stock. I'm all right. Don't look so worried, Valentin. Just get me out of here.'

He let go of her hand and started to examine the cage. There was plainly a door, but there was no lock, no keyhole. He tried to pull the door open.

'I've tried that,' she said sarcastically.

'I'm sure you have.'

'He closed it with a word,' she said.

'Who did?'

‘The one who clubbed me. Big bastard. Black hair. Freaky violet eyes.’

‘Gobleka,’ said Drusher.

‘Well, when I get out of here, he’s a dead man,’ she said. ‘He killed Garofar and Edde.’

‘Both of them?’ asked Drusher.

‘Cold blood. I had surrendered, and he just...’

Her voice trailed off.

‘Hadeed deserved a better end than that,’ she said miserably. ‘They both did.’

‘What do you mean he closed it with a word?’ asked Drusher, trying the cage door again.

‘I came to as he was putting me in here,’ she said. ‘He swung the door shut, then said a word, and it was locked fast.’

‘Enuncia,’ said a hoarse voice from the next cage. Drusher looked up. The other prisoner was Voriet. He was a mess. His throat and forehead were black with bruises, and his eyes were halfway swollen shut. The interrogator tried to struggle into a sitting position, but he was clearly in agony.

‘They used Enuncia,’ Voriet said. It sounded like his throat was full of blood.

‘Do you remember the word he used?’ Drusher asked Macks.

She shook her head.

‘It wasn’t really a word,’ she said. ‘I didn’t understand it.’

‘Do you know anything of Enuncia that might help us, Voriet?’ Drusher asked.

‘I would have used it already if I did,’ Voriet replied. ‘Eisenhorn keeps that knowledge to himself.’

‘How are you hurt?’

‘Broken arm, smashed hand,’ replied Voriet. He gestured to his face and throat with his left hand. ‘And this.’

‘Where is everyone else?’ Macks asked Drusher urgently.

‘Nayl’s dead,’ said Drusher. ‘Jaff too. She was the one who betrayed us.’

‘Jaff?’ Voriet said.

Drusher looked over at Voriet.

‘She was one of them, sir,’ Drusher said. ‘A Cognitae spy in your midst. She was the one who sicced that thing on us in Helter fortress.’

‘I can’t believe it...’ Macks whispered, rocking back in amazement.

Voriet was clearly shaken by the idea.

‘Audla?’ he whispered, uncomprehending.

‘She was Cognitae,’ said Drusher.

‘But she... We trusted her,’ said Voriet.

‘Trust seems to be a real issue with you people,’ said Drusher. ‘Anyway, she’s gone now. Eisenhorn... He dealt with her.’

‘Eisenhorn’s alive?’ asked Voriet.

‘Yes.’

‘Why isn’t he with you?’ asked Macks.

‘He had better things to do,’ said Drusher. He ran his fingers along the door edge again.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

Drusher glanced at Voriet.

‘Priorities. Isn’t that right, interrogator?’ Drusher asked. ‘Stopping Sark, stopping all of this, it’s what matters to him. We’re all expendable.’

‘Screw him,’ snapped Macks.

‘It’s unfortunate,’ said Voriet. ‘But I understand. This heresy must be brought to an end. We are of less consequence.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Drusher sarcastically. ‘Duty.’

‘We are sworn to our duty, sir,’ said Voriet.

‘Even renegades and rogues?’ asked Drusher. ‘I know all about him, Voriet. And he knows all about you.’

‘What do you mean, magos?’ asked Voriet.

‘That you joined his rogue band to watch him. That you affect sympathy to his cause, yet all the while you operate at the bidding of your ordo masters. He’s suspected you from the start.’

‘That’s not true,’ said Voriet.

‘By all means, deny it, Voriet. It’s probably safer. But he knows what you are. And he keeps you close because he hopes you will learn and see for yourself the legitimacy of his work. And vouch for him to your masters.’

‘You’re talking rubbish,’ growled Voriet.

‘Look where you are, Voriet,’ said Drusher. ‘In a cage, in a Cognitae stronghold in... What’s the word? Extimate space. The Immaterium Loom hums, sir, making weapons called graels to form an army that the Cognitae’s King in Yellow will unleash against Terra. Look at the evidence, and tell me this is not a battle that the Holy Ordos should be fighting. They

should listen to Eisenhower. They should help him, support him. Not declare him a heretic.'

Voriet didn't reply.

'Where are you getting this from, Valentin?' Macks asked, wide-eyed.

Drusher shrugged.

'From the lips of Eisenhower himself,' he replied. 'And from the mouth of the traitor Jaff. But it doesn't matter, Germaine. It's not business for ordinary people like you and me. It is way above us. It's part of a greater, darker cosmos that we are barely aware of in our day-to-day lives. So, I'm just going to get you out of here, and then we can go somewhere far away and forget all about it.'

'How?' she asked.

'How what?'

'How are you going to get me out of here?' she asked.

'That,' he conceded, 'is a problem. This damn door won't budge. And I don't know any magic word to open it.'

Drusher sat back and thought. He got up and wandered across to the workstation. It was cluttered with dirty surgical equipment and glass sample tubes he was quite certain he didn't want to touch. He looked around for a tool or instrument he could use to lever the door open. As he searched, his movement wafted the flames of the fat candles dotted around the work space. There was nothing useable in any of the drawers. He checked the storage bins. Surely some tools, a crowbar...

Nothing. Just junk and more old medicae supplies.

'Wait,' he said suddenly. 'Wait, wait, wait.'

'What?' asked Macks. She and Voriet stared at Drusher as he hurried back to them. Drusher pulled the gun out of his pocket and looked at it.

'Custom bullets,' he said. 'That's what poor Nayl said. Custom bullets, like the one he used to finish that undead thing. Etched by Eisenhower himself. Like amulets to break this magic.'

He aimed the weapon at the door frame.

'Whoa, whoa!' Macks cried in alarm.

'What?' asked Drusher. 'I know I'm not very good with guns, but...'

'I don't care what that thing's loaded with,' said Macks. 'You're aiming point-blank at cast iron, Valentin! It'll ricochet... or you'll miss the bars and hit me.'

'The marshal's right,' said Voriet. 'That's not going to work.'

‘I suppose not,’ said Drusher. He laughed sadly. ‘I was almost feeling heroic for a second there.’

He paused, then turned the gun around in his hand and fumbled with it until he managed to eject the clip.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Macks.

Drusher slid the top bullet out into his palm. He tucked the gun and the clip away in his coat pocket and held the bullet up to the light.

‘There’s a word etched on it all right,’ he said, squinting at it. ‘Throne knows what it is. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘So?’ asked Macks.

‘I need to...’ Drusher said, thinking. ‘I need to make a cast, or...’

Clutching the bullet, he went back to the workstation and carefully picked up one of the candles. Its flame guttered and twitched. Wax dripped off its base and dribbled down his fingers. He used an old, glass specimen slide to scrape up hot, soft wax from the desktop.

He went back to the cages quickly and began to shape a lump of soft wax on the door frame, roughly where a lock would have been.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Macks.

‘Concentrating,’ said Drusher as he worked. ‘Damn, this stuff is surprisingly hard to work with. There...’

‘Now what?’ asked Macks.

‘Just let it cool for a second,’ he said. ‘Talk to me.’

‘What?’

‘While we wait,’ he said, smiling. ‘I’m scared out of my wits here, Germaine. Talk to me. Tell me something.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. Something. Something from the old days that was good. I still think about the old days, you know? I think about you. I was a useless husband.’

‘I knew exactly what you were when I married you,’ she said.

‘So you should have known better?’ he laughed.

She managed a smile.

‘We both should, Valentin,’ she said. ‘You are an extraordinary man, Valentin. A magos biologis. Your life is driven by your work. As is mine. We *both* should have known better. We shouldn’t have been such damn optimists.’

‘Optimists or romantics?’ he asked.

‘Both,’ she admitted.

‘When did we stop being optimists, Germaine?’ he asked.

‘About fifteen years ago in Tycho City,’ she said, smiling.

‘It’s a shame,’ he said. ‘I think... I think I should have made more of a life. Made time for things. Been more than a magos. I think we should be optimists again.’

‘Do you?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he nodded, ‘because then there’s a better chance of this working.’

He bent down and tested the wax blob.

‘Let’s see now,’ he said. He took out the bullet, lined up the word etched on its case and gently pressed it into the wax. When he took the bullet away, a mirror print of the inhuman word was impressed in the blob.

‘Now what?’ Macks asked.

Drusher tried the cage door. It was still locked fast.

‘We wait,’ he said. ‘It may take a moment for the charm to take effect.’

‘You’re just making this up as you go along, aren’t you?’ said Macks.

‘Story of my life,’ he replied. ‘All made up as it goes along. Preposterous and unlikely. Like one of poor Hadeed Garofar’s faerie tales. Everything’s felt like that, especially since you came to the Bone Coast to find me. Fantastical and unnatural and following a set of rules no one has bothered to explain to me.’

‘It could work,’ said Voriet. He had pulled himself up close to the bars of his cage to watch. ‘The charm marking... It could break the word-lock. Enuncia conflicting with Enuncia.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ said Drusher.

Macks rattled the cage door.

‘It doesn’t seem to be,’ she said. He could hear her rising tension.

‘Just be patient, Germaine. Give it a moment.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ she snapped. ‘You’re not in here.’

‘Tell me about *True Heart*,’ he said, trying to distract her.

‘What?’

‘Did you wear it specially, or do you always wear it?’ Drusher asked. ‘I bought you that bottle years ago. If you used it regularly, it wouldn’t have lasted. Did you keep buying it?’

‘To remind myself of you? You wish.’

‘So you wore it specially?’

She shrugged.

‘It was in a drawer. I just thought—’

‘It would help you convince me,’ said Drusher quietly, ‘if you smelled the way I remembered you. It would make me feel like you still cared. Make me believe it was more than an official visit.’

Macks sighed.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Don’t be. It was clever. You were just doing your job. Subliminal persuasion.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘I’m sorry I put it on. I mean, that’s why I put it on. To put you at ease. To remind you of a time when we were close. But I’m sorry I did it.’

‘Why?’ he asked.

She looked at him through the bars.

‘Because it reminded me of a time when we were close too,’ she said.

Drusher reached his hand in through the bars, and she took it.

‘It’s going to be all right, Germaine,’ he said. ‘You and me, side by side, insane adventures.’

‘Which you always hated.’

‘I think of them fondly in hindsight,’ he said. ‘They were high jinks compared to this.’

‘It isn’t working,’ she said.

‘The reassurance?’

‘The wax charm,’ she replied. She let go of his hand and shook at the cage door again.

‘Just be patient,’ he said.

‘There’s no time for patience, magos,’ said Voriet sharply.

Drusher looked around. The woman with the cropped, red hair was coming down the steps onto the platform. She stared at him, smiled and drew her sidearm.



EIGHTEEN

Dead or Alive

Drusher ripped the pistol from his pocket and aimed it at her.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘Not another step.’

The woman’s smile broadened.

‘That’s the bitch who hurt me,’ said Voriet.

‘Her name is Streekal,’ said Drusher. ‘Streekal, right?’

‘Yes,’ the woman said.

‘Here’s what’s going to happen, Mamzel Streekal,’ said Drusher. He kept the gun aimed and tried not to let on how badly he was shaking. ‘Stop where you are, and toss your weapon now.’

‘Or what?’ she asked.

‘Or I shoot you between the eyes,’ he said. ‘I am a very good shot. Marshal Macks gave me this gun many years ago. She showed me how to use it. I have practised with it every day. I can knock a moving *Gortus gortus gershomi* out of the sky at one hundred metres.’

‘A what?’ asked Streekal sarcastically.

‘A sea raptor,’ growled Voriet from his cage.

‘See? You do learn,’ Drusher said sidelong. He glared at Streekal.

‘Toss the weapon now,’ he said.

‘Be careful,’ warned Voriet. ‘She is very, very fast. Don’t let her get close.’

Drusher thumbed back the hammer.

‘Lose the gun now, mamzel,’ he said.

Streekal stopped in her tracks. Her eyes narrowed, and her smile dissolved. She raised her sidearm, a compact laspistol, keeping her fingers open to show she had no real grip on it, then threw it aside. It hit the workstation and bounced onto the floor.

‘You won’t get out of here alive,’ she said.

‘Don’t think about shouting for help,’ said Drusher.

‘I won’t. You won’t get out of here alive, because I’m going to kill you.’

‘Let’s see how you do when you’re bound and gagged,’ said Drusher.

Streekal raised her hands.

‘Go on, then,’ she said.

‘Don’t get close to her!’ Voriet hissed.

‘Valentin, what are you even going to tie her up with?’ demanded Macks, shaking the cage door again. ‘Valentin, just shoot her!’

‘I’d prefer not to kill people unless I absolutely have to,’ said Drusher.

‘Then give me the gun and I’ll do it!’ snapped Macks.

Her hands still raised, Streekal took a step closer. She moved with slow poise, like a ballet dancer.

‘Come on then, magos,’ she said. ‘Tie me up. Make it tight.’

‘Stay where you are,’ Drusher warned.

She took another step.

‘For Throne’s sake,’ growled Voriet. ‘Kill her, magos! She is lethal!’

‘He’s right,’ said Streekal, taking another step.

‘Please stop coming closer,’ said Drusher. His hand was really trembling. ‘I’d really be very upset if I had to kill you.’

Streekal took another pace forwards.

‘Throne forgive me,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m sorry.’

He pulled the trigger.

The gun clicked.

Drusher stared at it in disbelief. He remembered taking the clip out to remove the bullet. The clip was still in his pocket.

‘Valentin!’ Macks screamed.

Streekal leapt forwards, grinning. She was faster than any human being he’d ever seen. She slammed into him and kicked him in the chest. Drusher flew back against the bars of Macks’ cage. He could hear Macks shrieking his name. He was winded. His chest burned. The world was spinning.

Streekal grabbed him by the front of his coat and hauled him to his feet. He tried to hit her with the useless gun. She blocked and sent it spinning out of his grasp.

‘You’re so dead,’ she said. She shoved him backwards. He staggered and grabbed the bars of Voriet’s cage to steady himself. The platform surface was uneven and sticky with oil residue. Voriet and Macks were yelling at

him. Macks had started to kick furiously at the door of her cage. It reminded Drusher of the way they had kicked the firebox out of the parlour grate: desperate and frantic. Macks was putting every ounce of her strength into kicking the iron door.

A door that would not open.

Drusher had no idea what he was going to do. He didn't know how to fight. He hadn't the first clue how to throw a punch.

Streekal was on him. She was smiling broadly. She had drawn a wicked-looking punch dagger. The blade glinted in the candlelight.

Drusher scrambled. He had to dodge somehow—

Streekal lunged. Drusher tried to evade. He felt so clumsy. So slow.

He lost his footing. His boots slid on the oil-slicked decking, and he went down hard on his backside. Streekal's dagger-punch missed him by a hair's breadth and struck the bars of Voriet's cage instead.

She barked in pain at the abrupt impact and started to turn. A hand grabbed her wrist through the bars of the cage. Wincing in agony, Voriet had seized her with his good hand. He wrenched her back with his full bodyweight and slammed her into the bars of the cage, pulling her arm and the punch dagger into the cage with him.

She fought back. She reached into the cage with her left hand and struck at Voriet as he clung on. Macks was still kicking at her cage door and shouting Drusher's name.

Drusher hauled himself upright. He knew he needed a weapon. There was nothing to hand. He launched himself at Streekal, and pummelled his fists at her. With her arm pinned between the bars by Voriet, she couldn't turn properly. One of Drusher's blows connected. He caught the back of her head so hard it felt like he had broken his fingers. The impact bounced Streekal's face off the bars.

She snarled in pain. Drusher staggered back, clutching his hand. He was still dizzy, and his feet were slipping. His chest burned so badly he couldn't catch his breath. He could hear the constant crash of Macks' boot against the unyielding cage door, her voice screaming his name.

Streekal plunged her left arm through the bars again. She got hold of Voriet's useless right arm and twisted. Broken bone-ends ground against each other. Voriet shrieked in abject pain and fell backwards, his grip on her right wrist lost.

Streekal pulled her arms out of the cage. She turned to Drusher and raised the punch dagger. The collision with the cage bars had broken her nose and split her lip. Blood was running down her chin. She wiped it away with her left wrist.

‘You are going to know such pain,’ she hissed as she came for him.

Drusher leapt backwards. He slipped again and fell on his back. She landed on him, flattened her left forearm across his neck to keep him pinned and raised the blade of the punch dagger to his cheek.

‘Such pain,’ she promised, and started to cut.

The door of Macks’ cage crashed wide so hard it opened one hundred and eighty degrees on its hinges and slammed against the metal bars. Macks flew out, bellowing.

She landed on them both and wrenched Streekal backwards, clawing at her. The pair of them rolled off Drusher, locked together. Streekal tried to push the punch-dagger low to stab Macks in the ribs. Macks grabbed her wrist and pinned it high. She rolled again, getting Streekal on her back and tried to slam her hand against the deck to make her drop the blade.

Streekal growled like an animal and went for Macks’ throat with her teeth. Macks called her the filthiest word Drusher had ever heard her call anybody, and headbutted Streekal in the face.

Streekal’s skull slammed back into the deck. She groaned, dazed. Macks slammed her hand against the deck again, and the dagger spun away. Streekal tried to squirm. Macks punched her in the jaw.

‘Stay down!’ Macks shouted.

Streekal did not obey. Macks knew how to fight. She was a trained marshal. But Streekal’s combat training was far superior to the Magistratum’s.

She lifted her shoulders, arched her back and hoisted Macks off the ground. Macks lost her balance and started to slide and roll. Streekal bent her legs, got both feet under Macks’ belly and kicked hard.

Macks went flying backwards. Streekal leapt up and landed on her. Now she was on top. Her hands closed around Macks’ throat and began to squeeze. Macks fought back, but she couldn’t shift the woman’s weight off her. She began to choke.

Drusher grabbed Streekal and tried to drag her off Macks. Streekal jerked backwards with an elbow that left Drusher bent over on his knees, all the air knocked out of him.

He wheezed helplessly, trying to refill his lungs, tears running down his face.

Streekal got off Macks and straightened up. Macks lay on her back, gasping, unable to breathe or move. Calmly, Streekal walked over to the workstation and retrieved her laspistol.

She came back and stood over Drusher and Macks. She aimed the weapon at Macks' face.

'Heretic-bitch!' Voriet yelled from his cage in hopeless pain. 'You'll burn in eternity for this!'

'I *do* hope so,' said Streekal.

A shot cracked out.

Streekal took a step backwards. She looked puzzled. She swayed.

Another shot hit her, and a ribbon of blood and tissue spurted from her back. She staggered. She looked down at the two bloody holes in her torso, trying to make sense of them. Then she looked up.

Harlon Nayl limped across the platform towards her. He was battered, dried blood caking the side of his face. He was aiming his large automatic pistol at her.

'That's two,' he said. 'Do you know how to die, or do you need another lesson?'

Swaying drunkenly, Streekal raised her pistol to aim at him.

Nayl fired again.

Streekal dropped her gun. Her arm flopped back against her side. She took a couple of awkward, wobbling steps then fell down. The slope of the sagging platform rolled her body over a couple of times, then she simply began to slide on the tarry surface.

Her corpse dropped off the platform lip. They heard it hit the deep, ancient pool of promethium far below.



NINETEEN

The Engine Wakes

‘Where’s Streekal?’ asked Gobleka. His intimidating violet stare fixed on Davinch and Blayg.

‘She’s hunting for him,’ said Blayg.

‘And Jaff’s prisoner might be loose too?’ asked Gobleka.

‘It’s possible,’ said Davinch.

‘Didn’t you check the cellar?’

Davinch hesitated.

‘I was going to,’ he replied. ‘I was on my way down. Then I heard you call my name, so—’

‘I didn’t call your name, you idiot,’ snapped Gobleka. ‘I’ve been up here all the time. You wouldn’t have heard me.’

‘But—’ Davinch began.

‘He was playing with you,’ sneered Gobleka. ‘Psykana tricks, you idiot. He’s trying to game us.’

He turned slowly, surveying the expanse of the Loom visible from the main gantry. In the cage behind him, Sark shivered and whimpered.

‘He’s a monster,’ mumbled Blayg. ‘You should have seen it, Gobleka. What he did to Jaff.’

‘She deserved anything she got,’ replied Gobleka. ‘She let them get *in* here. She let them walk right in.’

‘Wasn’t that the point?’ asked Davinch. ‘To bring them here? To silence them?’

‘Not *inside* the hall, you idiot,’ said Gobleka.

‘Well, maybe not that,’ replied Davinch. ‘But it makes it easier. They’re trapped. They’re confused. This place messes with your head, especially when you’re not used to it.’

‘Davinch, if I’d wanted to bring them *inside* to kill them,’ said Gobleka, ‘I’d have called in reinforcements. Proactive specialists. A kill-team from the scholam on Gudrun. Maybe negotiate some cooperation from the Traitor Hosts. Or even petition the King to lend us a grael. This is a mess. There’s no time for any of that now. An outside assist would take days or weeks to arrive.’

‘Yeah, but—’ Davinch began.

‘Weeks, Davinch,’ said Gobleka firmly. ‘We don’t have weeks.’

‘But we’ve killed four of them,’ said Blayg. ‘And two more caged up. Maybe three, if Jaff got that magos shut away before she died. That just leaves the old bastard himself...’

‘The others don’t matter, you arsehole,’ said Gobleka. ‘They’re just foot-soldiers, ten-a-penny. The old bastard is the old bastard for a *reason*. We’ve got an alpha-class psyker with a grudge loose in here. Either of you combat psykers? Didn’t frigging think so. I’ve got to blank him. I’ve got to use Sark.’

He turned and looked at the cage.

‘I’ve got to use *you* now, haven’t I, magos?’ he called.

‘Magos! M-magos!’ the naked wretch in the cage gurgled back.

‘Blayg, get the kit,’ said Gobleka.

‘Wait, Goran,’ said Davinch, stepping forwards. ‘That’s not a good idea. Chase will have your guts. The instructions were clear. Sark is a creative asset. We use what strength he has to *manufacture*. He’s not a proactive weapon, and we don’t waste his power using him that way.’

‘The frigging rules were changed when Jaff ballsed it up, Davinch,’ said Gobleka. ‘Chase might not like it. The King might not like it. But they’ll see it was necessary.’

‘But if you damage him—’

‘We’ll keep him sound,’ said Gobleka.

‘Gobleka, Sark’s burning out,’ said Davinch. ‘He’s still exhausted from the last weaving. He needs time to recover. And if you start him up, and use his power, we don’t know how many more constructs we’ll get out of him. We may not meet our quota. Or at the very least, we could fall months behind.’

Gobleka walked across the platform until he was nose-to-nose with the tall, tattooed man. Davinch pulled back a little.

‘Yes,’ said Gobleka. ‘Chase will be furious. Imagine how much *more* furious she’ll be if we allow Eisenhower to shut this place down? She’d bring us back from the dead just to kill us all *over* again. Protecting this place is our first responsibility. The Cognitae cannot lose the Loom. It’s not an option. He must be found and finished before he can do any damage to it. So we’ve got to use Sark.’

Davinch nodded reluctantly.

‘Besides,’ Gobleka added. ‘The other one’s out there. What’s her name?’

‘Betancore,’ said Blayg.

‘Right. She needs to be wiped too. We can’t risk any word of this getting off-world. So, Sark can handle that as well. Blayg, get the kit.’

The portly man nodded and hurried off the gantry to a lower platform. Gobleka put his assault weapon down on the deck and went over to the cage. He crouched down.

‘Magos?’ he called softly. ‘Draven? You stay calm now, you hear me?’

The man in the cage moaned and curled up in a tight ball. Gobleka put his hand on the frame of the cage door and said a single word that made Davinch cringe.

The cage door swung open. Sark whined and curled up even tighter.

Blayg returned, carrying a medicae pack. He opened the case, prepped an injector and handed it to Gobleka.

‘Full dose?’ asked Gobleka.

Blayg nodded.

Gobleka crawled into the cage. Sark shrank back from him, becoming agitated. Gobleka grabbed him, pinned him with one arm and jabbed the injector into the meat of his left buttock. Sark squealed.

Gobleka let him go, slid out of the cage and sealed it again with an unword. Sark began to twitch, and then the twitching grew to a violent thrashing. He contorted and twisted, veins bulging, his limbs spasming.

‘Hell’s teeth,’ murmured Davinch as he watched. ‘It takes him longer to come back every time.’

‘There will come a time when he won’t come back at all,’ said Blayg.

‘Then we’ll find a replacement,’ said Gobleka. ‘We always knew that day would come...’

His voice trailed off.

‘What?’ asked Blayg.

‘The old bastard,’ said Gobleka.

Davinich and Blayg turned in terror, expecting to see Eisenhower behind them.

‘Idiots,’ Gobleka laughed. ‘Think about it. Think about it, we could turn this mess into a huge victory. Turn it right around. End the threat of Eisenhower *and* replace the one failing component of this system.’

‘Eisenhorn?’ asked Blayg.

‘He’s perfect. He’s strong. Mentally, physically. The psykana aspect is a huge advantage. He’s already attuned.’

‘Yeah, but his *mindset*,’ said Davinich. ‘He wouldn’t cooperate. He wouldn’t be willing.’

‘You think that animal is willing?’ asked Gobleka, pointing at the man writhing and gasping in the cage.

‘He was to begin with,’ said Blayg.

‘The viral shots will destroy the old bastard’s resistance,’ said Gobleka. ‘They’ll negate his will, his self, and rewire his brain and his soul. We’ll break him and reshape him. I don’t think it’ll be hard, either. Eisenhower’s been on the edge for too long. Decades. He’s been declared a damn heretic, for Terra’s sake! It won’t be a stretch for him. He’s seen the warp. He knows its allure. We’ll just tip him over the threshold so he sees the real truth. He’ll realise where he should have been from the very start. He’ll embrace it like a long-lost love.’

Gobleka grinned broadly at the two men beside him.

‘And Chase and the King,’ he said, ‘they will relish the sheer poetry of their greatest adversary becoming their most valuable asset.’

‘Goran?’ a weak voice called from inside the cage. ‘Goran? Are you there?’

Gobleka looked at his colleagues.

‘Get moving, both of you,’ he said. ‘Find Streekal. Kill anyone else you find. Anyone, caged or not. If you encounter Eisenhower, try and drive him this way.’

‘If he fights?’ asked Davinich.

‘Then kill him if you have to. But only if you have to. Intact, or alive enough to work with, that’s preferable. Get on with it.’

Davinich and Blayg looked at each other then turned and left the gantry. Gobleka walked back to the cage.

‘Sark? Magos?’

Inside the cage, Draven Sark slowly stood up. He looked around, blinking at the light, his naked, emaciated body suddenly upright and straight-backed.

‘Have I been asleep?’ he asked. His voice was thin and dry, but it had lost its deranged flutter.

‘Yes, for a while,’ said Gobleka.

‘Can I come out, Goran? Can I come out of the cage now, please?’

‘Not yet, magos,’ said Gobleka.

‘Have I been asleep?’

‘Yes,’ said Gobleka.

‘The dreams are bad,’ said Sark. ‘I don’t like them.’

‘I know, magos, but they will be over soon.’

‘You promised that last time, Goran,’ Sark said, looking reproachfully at Gobleka. ‘You promised I could come out.’

‘The work is important, you know that,’ said Gobleka. ‘But I mean it this time.’

‘Is it time to weave again?’ asked Sark. He put his hand to his forehead and kneaded his brow. ‘I don’t think I’m strong enough. I feel like everything is slipping away. Everything is dark at the edges, Goran. Closing in on me. When I weave, I walk out into the darkness, Goran. Into dark places. It’s very lonely. I don’t want to go back out there any more.’

‘You always say that...’ Gobleka said soothingly.

Sark looked at him sharply through the bars. Anger spiked in him.

‘Because it’s true!’ he cried. ‘How many years have I spent in the dark now? Eh? It feels like centuries. These brief moments of light and wakefulness are too rare. I have sacrificed my life for the King, Gobleka. My life.’

‘Then you won’t want that sacrifice to be in vain, will you?’ asked Gobleka.

‘What do you mean by that?’ asked Sark.

‘I haven’t roused you to weave, magos,’ said Gobleka. ‘There’s more weaving to be done, but not today. The hall is under threat.’

‘Threat?’

‘The Inquisition has found us,’ said Gobleka.

‘How the hell could they have done?’ asked Sark, horrified. ‘Keshtre is extimate. It is hidden from all, unless I invite them in. I have taken great pains—’

‘And now you must take greater ones,’ said Gobleka. ‘Gregor Eisenhower is here. In this tower. He will undo all you have done. Your life’s work. You must start the Loom. You must find him and speak out the means to nullify him.’

‘Eisenhorn,’ said Sark quietly. ‘Really here?’

‘Yes.’

‘I never thought he’d have the guile to get this close,’ said Sark. He glanced at Gobleka. ‘You’re right, of course, Goran. He must be purged. Are there materials to hand?’

‘Some,’ said Gobleka. ‘A few bodies in storage. Failed test subjects, ones we haven’t disposed of yet. Some other corpses too. You’ll find them once you start.’

‘Go open up storage, Goran,’ Sark said. He knelt down and looked at Gobleka through the bars.

‘Do you want him dead, Goran?’ he asked. ‘Or do you want him to suffer first?’

‘Oh, I want him to suffer, magos,’ said Gobleka, ‘but I don’t want him dead. I want him helpless. Deprived of his abilities.’

‘He’s too dangerous to toy with, Goran.’

‘Think how we can use him,’ said Gobleka.

‘Use him?’

‘You want the dreams to end, don’t you?’ Gobleka asked. ‘You want to be free of that cage? This is how.’

A sad smile crossed the magos’ face.

‘Goran,’ he said. ‘You should have led with that. This will be a pleasure.’

He closed his eyes and raised his hands. Quietly at first, the words started to issue from his mouth. Half-words, un-words, formless words. He began to speak them faster and more loudly.

Gobleka watched for a while, until the discomfort became too great. He picked up his assault weapon, left the gantry and walked up two flights of stairs to an upper platform. Below him, the words echoed around the tower.

On the platform, there was a modular container, a metal cargo pod from a commercial shift-ship. It was battered and rusty. He disengaged the lock and swung the door open. The smell of decay that wafted out was sickening.

Gobleka backed away, his hand clamped over his nose and mouth. Organic waste fluid trickled out over the container’s sill. He left the door

wide open.

He waited. Then he turned his back on the container and sat down on the platform edge beside the head of the stairs.

Below him, the words grew louder. A light began to glow from the gantry below. It throbbed and grew steadily brighter. The machine hum in the tower grew louder.

After a while, he heard a knock and a scrape as things stirred inside the battered cargo pod. He did not look around.

Nor did he look around, a few minutes later, when the first dragging, shuffling footsteps moved past him towards the stairs.

‘So,’ said Drusher, ‘not that I’m saying I’m unhappy about it or anything, but how come you’re not dead?’

Nayl was leading them up the staircase towards the massive girder frame under the Loom. He glanced back.

‘I got shot, magos, I fell,’ he said. ‘I survived both.’

‘Simple as that?’

‘Luck is never simple,’ replied Nayl. ‘Jaff got me in the back with a las-shot. My jack armour stopped the worst of it, but the thing with jack armour is that it dissipates the force so it can’t penetrate. The impact knocked me right over the rail.’

‘That’s luck?’ asked Drusher.

‘I fell,’ said Nayl. ‘Quite a long way. But, as you may have noticed, there’s a lot of machinery in this place. I bounced off some gigantic flywheel. Banged up my head and my shoulder. Then I got hooked up. By the strap of my rifle. Wound up just hanging there from a cog, throttled by my own gun-strap.’

‘And *that’s* luck?’

‘Well, it broke my fall,’ said Nayl. ‘If it hadn’t been for the cog, I’d have gone straight down to the bottom. I waited as long as I could, waited for the cog to cycle around, then cut the strap and climbed down some gears onto a platform.’

‘It’s very interesting what you call “lucky”,’ said Drusher.

‘I’m still alive, aren’t I?’ asked Nayl. ‘That’s the lucky part.’

Drusher was fairly sure Nayl was downplaying the cost of his escape. From the way he was limping, the way he was holding himself, it was clear he was carrying some considerable injuries.

They all were. Once they'd got Voriet out of his cage using another of Drusher's patent 'wax charms', they'd patched him up as best they could, using the old medical supplies in the storage bins. His smashed arm was slung and bound around his torso, the most effective temporary splinting they could muster. He was very pale and very slow, and his pain was constant. Drusher was worried about the damage to Voriet's throat too. He and Macks were taking turns to support the interrogator so he could manage the steps.

Macks seemed robust enough, but the brawl with Streekal had left her bruised and sore. For his part, Drusher felt like he had been run over by a tank. His hand throbbed, and his chest, back and belly ached so much it made him wince. Macks had put a dressing over the slice Streekal had cut in his cheek.

'You're a silly bastard,' she'd told him gently while she did it.

'You need to learn some new moves, magos,' Voriet had said, smiling through his pain. 'That's twice you've tried to get out of trouble by opening a cage and letting something wild out.'

As they climbed, Drusher told Nayl about Jaff and Eisenhower. He related everything he could think of.

'Have you seen Eisenhower?' he asked.

'No,' said Nayl. 'I haven't seen anybody. Not until I found you lot.'

'Do we have a plan?' asked Macks.

'Find a way out,' said Nayl. 'Maybe try to use your wax charm trick on a door or something. You're all beaten up. I think Voriet needs serious attention. This is one of those times when we need to escort casualties out of the front line.'

'No,' said Drusher. 'Eisenhower's gone up to deal with Sark and Gobleka. He'll need help. He's... struggling. Something about this place hurts him.'

'Oh, screw him,' said Macks.

'I told him, once I'd got you out, I'd come back and help him,' said Drusher.

'He didn't come and help you,' said Macks.

'No,' said Drusher. 'But then, he never said he was going to. In fact, he said he definitely wasn't going to. I, on the other hand, said I would help him when I could.'

'So, what, you're a man of your word now?' asked Macks.

'Always have been,' said Drusher.

‘With respect,’ said Nayl, stopping so he could turn and look back at them, ‘I admire your spirit, magos, but I don’t know what sort of help you’re going to be. Your expertise is not... not combat-oriented.’

Drusher stared at him.

Nayl looked away, awkwardly.

‘You know what?’ he said. ‘I’m sorry I said that. I take it back. It takes balls for a man to go into a fight when he knows how to fight. It takes a damn sight more to go in when he doesn’t. Not to have a clue, but to go for it anyway. Balls of steel.’

‘That’s what we’ll call him from now on,’ said Macks. ‘Balls of steel.’

‘Head full of stupid, mind,’ she added.

Nayl smiled.

‘This is a very big deal, isn’t it, Nayl?’ asked Drusher, gesturing at the machine above them. ‘What’s happening here is, uh...’

‘The biggest,’ said Nayl.

‘So then,’ said Drusher with a shrug. ‘Eisenhorn was right, really. We’re all expendable. In the face of this. This isn’t Eisenhorn’s private war. The outcome affects everything we know, everything we are. Right?’

‘Right,’ said Nayl.

‘So we should help Eisenhorn in any way we can,’ said Drusher. ‘I mean, we may not be any use at all, but we should try. How did you put it? “To not have a clue, but to go for it anyway”?’

‘Something along those lines,’ said Nayl.

‘I agree with the magos,’ said Voriet.

‘Shut up,’ said Macks. ‘You can barely stand.’

‘Doesn’t stop me agreeing, marshal,’ said Voriet.

‘All right,’ said Nayl. ‘We go up. We take a look. If it’s out of our league, we get the hell out. Find a way out of this place. Least we can do is get to Medea and get a signal sent.’

‘To the ordos?’ asked Macks.

‘Yes,’ said Nayl.

‘The ordos?’ asked Voriet.

‘I think we’re way past hiding now, Darra,’ Nayl said. ‘I think Eisenhorn would reckon so too. We’ve got solid intelligence on the Cognitae here. Old... differences, they don’t matter now. If we can’t help Eisenhorn, we scream for help and bring the Holy frigging Inquisition down on this place, guns blazing.’

‘Even if that means... spending the rest of your life incarcerated?’ asked Drusher. ‘Or being burned as a heretic? They still do that, right?’

‘Even if,’ said Nayl.

‘Well, I agree with that last part,’ said Macks. ‘Call in the ordos. The Magistratum. The Territorial Guard. Anything and everything. But as for the rest of that big-talk pissing contest, I utterly despair of men, sometimes.’

‘Me too,’ said Nayl. ‘We’re hardly packing much kill-power.’

Between them, Nayl had his big Tronsvasse auto, Drusher had his Regit compact, which Macks had recovered and reunited with the clip in Drusher’s pocket, and Macks had Streekal’s laspistol.

‘Let’s go then,’ said Nayl. He turned and started climbing the gantry stairs again. Drusher took a turn supporting Voriet, and Macks went ahead of them, behind Nayl.

‘Thank you,’ said Voriet quietly as Drusher helped him up the stairs. Every step made him wince and sigh.

‘For what?’

‘Not telling Nayl what you know,’ said Voriet. ‘About me, I mean. About what Eisenhower said about me.’

‘Not my business,’ said Drusher.

‘You blurted it out well enough down at the cages,’ said Voriet.

‘Yeah, well, we’re beyond that now,’ said Drusher. ‘And there’s more than enough trouble to go around as it is.’

They hobbled on together, Drusher’s arm around Voriet’s back.

‘You should tell them, though,’ said Drusher.

‘Who?’

‘The ordos. Your masters,’ said Drusher. ‘If you get out of here, you should go to them and tell them what you know. What you’ve seen. What you believe.’

Voriet nodded.

‘That’s not good,’ said Macks from up ahead. She was looking at the Great Machine above them.

High above, at the very top of the tower, a strange glow was filling the air. It expanded, growing brighter and brighter.

A breeze started to rise. The humming all around them increased.

With a sudden but steady motion that startled them all, the huge wheels and cogs and gears of the Loom began to turn faster, until they were

spinning and rattling and whizzing. The slowly cycling machine had suddenly burst into frantic, industrial life.

‘Yeah,’ Nayl yelled back over the clattering roar of the spinning cogs.
‘Not good at all.’

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TWENTY

Mindless

Eisenhorn stopped for a moment and crouched in the shadows. The sudden and furious din of the Loom around him was making it hard to focus.

Harder than before. The mere background hum of the cycling machine had worn him down and deadened his mind. It had taken him much longer than he had hoped to clamber up to the high levels of the tower. He was painfully aware of how old and unreliable his body had become. It was held together with augmetics and metal bracing. The slow climb had left him tired and short of breath.

Now his mind, the part of him he'd always been able to trust, seemed as faulty as his body. He felt muffled, swathed in a darkness that limited his gifts. A migraine pain stabbed behind his eyes.

The noise of the suddenly active Loom was intense. It was like being at the heart of a Mechanicus factory plant. Sark, or Gobleka, or both, had begun something. There were various possibilities, but the most obvious was that they were moving against him.

He had considered simply sabotaging the Loom. He carried two automatic pistols: the big Hecuter .45, loaded with standard munitions, which was in his hand, and a smaller Scipio compact, loaded with custom rounds, which was strapped in his chest rig. A few shots with the engraved rounds of the Scipio might damage the Loom, possibly even destroy it. They were notoriously volatile devices. And he still had what scraps of his psykana talent remained, and his small but potent vocabulary of Enuncia.

But if he managed to cripple and destroy the Loom, what then? They were in extimate space. He'd die along with it. The Cognitae's precious Gershom facility would be lost, but so would the vital things he had learned from Jaff about the King in Yellow, Sancour and the Angelus Subsector.

A key threat would be stopped, but the greater threat would remain.

Not for the first time, he focused his mind and tried to reach Betancore outside in the Karanines. It was futile. Either the fold in space would not let his messages through, or his abilities were virtually gone. He feared the latter. The pain in his head was intense. He could barely form a thought, let alone try to send it.

So what were his options? He could push on to face Gobleka and Sark. Or he could get out. A word of Enuncia had unfolded reality, bringing him and the group into Keshtre. Surely another word would allow him to step out?

But the Loom would still be running, and Sark and Gobleka would still be alive. And there was no guarantee that if he got out, he could ever get back in again.

By his reckoning, the cage gantry was not far above him. The light was bright up there, a gold amber radiance that turned all the engine mechanisms above him into silhouettes, and all the shadows below him into stark, hard edges.

He had to go on. He wondered if he could. The etheric dissonance field generated by the Loom had increased considerably when the machine started to run at full rate. It was no longer just dulling him and making him sick, it was actively tearing at his psycho-sensitive mind. He thought ruefully about Medea's last words to him. She'd been right. He should have brought Cherubael, despite all the handling problems that would have caused. He needed something that hit hard, like the monstrous daemonhost. He was alone and woefully weakened.

He got up and began to move again, limping for the next metal stairwell.

The first shots hit the platform deck beside him. Bright las-bolts buckled the grille and punched through it.

Eisenhorn threw himself flat. There was very little cover. He tried to gauge the angle the shots had come from by the holes they had cut in the platform, but his facility for psychometric reading and prediction was as good as gone. The damn Loom. It was neutering his mind.

Another flurry of shots came in. One punched clean through the metal handrail above him. This time, he glimpsed them in the air, glowing bolts, arcing down at him. He had some sense of an angle. He rose on one knee and banged off a series of shots with the heavy Hecuter, spent cases pinging

out of the ejector. He saw the shots spark and flash as they struck metalwork above him.

He saw a figure dart for cover along a catwalk: the tattooed man, Davinch, his twin laspistols in his hands.

Eisenhorn fired again. In partial cover behind a flywheel, Davinch blasted back. The las-fire went wide of Eisenhorn, to the left this time. The Cognitae fool was a poor shot. He'd had three decent tries at Eisenhorn and missed by a margin each time.

Eisenhorn crawled back, until he was half-shielded by a spinning cog. He took careful, considered aim on the flywheel above, waiting for Davinch to poke his head out again.

Eisenhorn focused his will.

+Davinch!+

It hurt, like a hot spike between the eyes. Eisenhorn tried again. A mental goad like that, particularly when you knew a man's name, was usually enough to jerk him out into the open. He got into the hindbrain and gave it a flick the target couldn't resist. Under optimal circumstances, he could psyche into a man's head and make him jump to his death or shoot himself, a look of horror on his face as his body turned against him.

But these circumstances were far from optimal. The Loom's dissonance field was both snuffing out his psionic ability and reflecting what little he could broadcast.

Eisenhorn began to move again, keeping low as he headed along the platform. Another burst of fire chopped at him. Hard rounds this time, an assault weapon from the rate. The metal slugs ripped across the platform and sparked off a brass bearing behind him.

Different weapon. This was someone else. Blayg, or Gobleka, perhaps. Again, the aim had been wide. Were they *all* terrible shots?

No, they weren't. The evidence was plain. Keshtre was a vital facility, but the Cognitae had only staffed it with a handful of operatives. Just enough to keep it running. So they had to be good, the very best. Elite cult soldiers, hand-picked for their skills. Eisenhorn knew from the case file that Gobleka was a fine marksman. He'd cut down Interrogator Arfon Kadle on Gudrun with a single headshot at three thousand metres.

These men weren't trying to kill him. They were trying to drive him.

He kept low and scanned for movement. He glimpsed Blayg, the short, jowly one, switching positions. Eisenhorn got off a single shot. Blayg

dropped out of sight. A moment later, he reappeared and hammered the deck beside Eisenhower with autofire.

Eisenhorn fought back the pain clouding his head and made a decision. He had to change tactics. He had to use whatever edge, whatever chance, however desperate, to seize back some advantage. They were trying to drive him. They wanted him alive. If he was their prisoner, he might be taken closer to the very place he was struggling to reach. But it had to be convincing.

He rose to his feet, clearly visible.

‘You want to drive me, do you?’ he yelled. ‘Herd me?’

He fired two shots in Blayg’s direction.

‘I won’t play your game!’ he shouted. Another fierce burst of autofire rattled into the decking beside him. Eisenhower remained standing. He didn’t even flinch.

Blayg reappeared, peeking down, his combat autorifle aimed at Eisenhower.

‘Comply now, or we drop you!’ Blayg shouted.

‘What the hell makes you think I’ll cooperate?’ Eisenhower yelled back.

‘Look down!’ Blayg called back, his aim fixed.

Eisenhorn glanced down. He saw the gently wavering red dot of Blayg’s targeter floating on the centre of his chest.

‘We’d like you alive,’ Blayg called, ‘but it’s not essential. Take the stairs up. Do it! Or I take the shot!’

‘Go to hell,’ said Eisenhower.

Blayg had pushed it as far as he wanted to. He had no illusions about Gregor Eisenhower’s brutal and relentless reputation. He’d heard all the stories. He’d seen Jaff’s body. The man was inhumanly dangerous.

Damn Gobleka’s preferences. Enough chances. Enough playing with fire.

Blayg squeezed the trigger, ripping out a tight burst from his autorifle.

The rounds hit Eisenhower precisely where the marker had painted him, full in the chest. Eisenhower reeled backwards in a puff of red vapour, hit the back rail of the platform and slumped down.

Blayg slowly rose to his feet.

‘Davinch!’ he shouted. ‘He’s down!’

Sprawled on his back against the rail, Eisenhower lifted his head and his Hecuter.

‘That’s right, show yourself, idiot,’ he murmured, and fired.

The large-calibre round burst the top of Blayg's skull. He swayed, then folded up in a heap.

Eisenhorn slowly heaved himself to his feet. It was hard to breathe. His chest plating had stopped most of the burst, but his ribs were cracked, and his chest felt as if it had been crushed. One of the high-velocity rounds had punctured through the plate and done some soft tissue damage.

Another had gone low under the plate, punching clean through him below his ribs. Blood was weeping down the front of his coat. He could feel more soaking his back. He concentrated and tried to use his will to block the pain, and seal the bleeding.

His will was gone. The Loom had taken it from him.

Davinch was standing behind him.

Eisenhorn started to turn, but he was far too slow. Davinch whirled a spin-kick that knocked Eisenhorn sideways, then another that flicked away the Hecuter. A third kick, straight to the sternum, put Eisenhorn on his back. Agony from the gunshot trauma flooded him.

The tattooed man stood over him, looking down, both laspistols aimed at Eisenhorn's face.

'Look at you,' Davinch sneered. 'The famous Gregor Eisenhorn, scourge of heretics. It's over, you old bastard. What are you, without that famous psykana gift of yours? Eh? Frigging nothing. Just an old, worn-out shell. A ruin. A nothing.'

Davinch peered closer. He grinned.

'And you're shot too. Dear old Blayg plugged you. That'll be a through-and-through. You're going to bleed out like a pig. That is, if I let you.'

Davinch's smile grew broader.

'And you're going to wish,' he whispered, 'that I had.'

They climbed to the next platform and stopped to let Voriet rest. Nayl kept watch. Drusher and Macks eyed the hurtling gears of the Great Machine all around them with both fear and wonder.

Macks said something.

'What?' asked Drusher. It was hard to hear over the clattering roar of the machine.

'I said it's giving me a headache,' said Macks, raising her voice.

Drusher nodded.

'The noise,' he said.

‘And the light, and the heat,’ she grimaced. The light shining down from above was brighter than before. It looked sickly and unclean, like the glow of something toxic and contaminating. It made Drusher remember a day, years before, before he had first met Macks, when he’d been caught out in the middle of the steppes of Lower Udar. He had hiked north from a grim livestock town called Kellikow, hoping to find a grazing station the men at Kellikow had mentioned. The station was long gone and derelict, and he’d been looking for alternative shelter when the thunderstorm came in. The light, the whole sky, had turned an extraordinary shade of yellow, a fulminous twilight to herald the fury.

The light filling the tower looked the way the light had done that day. Threatening and unnatural. He’d managed to trudge back to Kellikow, soaked, and spent a week in the infirmary, fighting off pneumonia.

Drusher missed those simpler times.

‘It’s not just that,’ said Voriet from nearby. He was leaning heavily against the metal handrail. ‘The mechanism’s generating an interference pattern. Background psionics. It’s messing with us.’

Macks wasn’t listening. ‘What the hell’s that?’ she asked suddenly. ‘Nayl? Nayl!’

She pointed. There was a figure on a parallel catwalk some distance away. They could just see it, moving out of sight behind part of the Loom mechanism. It was a human figure, walking quite fast, determinedly, arms at its sides.

‘I don’t know,’ said Nayl, moving along the platform to get a better look, gun in hand.

‘Cognitae?’ asked Macks.

The look on Nayl’s face was doubtful.

‘Another one!’ Voriet called out. A second figure had appeared on a platform several stages below them. This one was limping, almost shuffling, but though slower than the first, it seemed equally determined.

‘Get behind me,’ said Nayl.

They turned. A third figure had appeared. It was coming up the steps towards them. It had once been human. It had taken considerable damage to the left side of its body and head. Its flesh was beginning to rot and discolour. Its good eye fixed them with an eager glare. What was left of its face was expressionless.

It was moving fast, striding up the steps and onto the platform.

‘Throne’s sakes!’ Macks exclaimed.

‘Back up!’ Nayl shouted at the advancing thing. He aimed his gun. The figure did not slow down.

Nayl fired. Centre mass. The heavy round had no effect. Drusher saw a telltale green shimmer around the figure, a pinprick green light in its empty socket. A crackle like electricity.

‘Nayl!’ he yelled. He pulled the gun out of his pocket and aimed. One shot.

The autosnub jerked in his hand. Drusher discovered it was surprisingly hard to hit a target, even one as big as a human being coming right at him, just a few metres away. His shot simply clipped the figure’s right shoulder.

He was about to curse at himself when the figure went down. It went from walking to falling without an interruption. Suddenly slack, as dead as it looked, it crumbled, bounced off the handrail and lay still.

‘An animation,’ said Drusher.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Nayl. He was taking the clip out of his gun and opening his pocket to fish out custom rounds.

‘Like before,’ said Drusher.

‘Indeed so, magos,’ said Nayl. ‘Don’t let them touch you!’ he yelled to Macks and Voriet.

‘Nayl!’ Macks called. Another figure was mounting the staircase at the other end of their platform. Before death it had been a stern, older woman. Corruption had bloated and blackened her flesh. Green electric sparks floated in her dead eyes and fizzled around her bared teeth. She too was moving rapidly, coming right at them without hesitation.

Macks squeezed off two las-bolts at her. They were solid shots, but the energy just radiated away.

‘Don’t waste it!’ Nayl told her. ‘It won’t have an effect.’ He had slammed a specialised round into the chamber of his Tronsvasse. He stepped in front of Macks and Voriet, aimed at the woman as she reached the head of the stairs and shot her between the eyes.

There was an ugly puff of matter. The woman’s head snapped back, and she toppled down the stairs. She ended up at the foot of the steps, on her back, her legs tangled in the side rails.

‘They’ve sent these things to get us, haven’t they?’ Drusher asked Nayl.

‘Yes,’ he replied. He was loading another round. ‘*Raised* them. That might be why the Loom’s working.’

‘But we can stop them,’ said Drusher.

Nayl nodded.

‘But it depends how many of them there are,’ he said. ‘We’ve only got a few custom rounds between us.’

‘How... how many could they have made?’ Drusher asked.

‘Depends how many people the Cognitae have killed,’ said Voriet. ‘How many bodies they have.’

‘Let’s move,’ said Nayl. ‘Only shoot if you have to.’

They hurried to the steps where the first figure had appeared. Macks and Drusher helped Voriet between them. They moved down, but another figure had appeared, striding towards them. It was hard to tell if this one had been male or female in life. Its death appeared to have involved being flayed.

‘Up! Up!’ Nayl urged them, guiding them to the side and up a link staircase to a higher catwalk. He waited as the flayed thing drew closer, then dropped it with a single shot.

He hurried after the other three, up the steps and onto the higher catwalk.

‘Be wary,’ he advised. ‘These devils are much faster than the thing that came for us in Helter.’

‘Because they’re more intact,’ said Drusher.

‘What?’ asked Macks.

‘The thing in Helter was just old bones. This force animates them, but it can only use the structure it’s got to work with. Simple mechanics, really. It can make disarticulated bones rise and shuffle along. But these poor creatures are intact—’

‘More or bloody less,’ said Macks.

‘They’re articulated,’ said Drusher. ‘They have tendons, sinews, muscle mass. The force can use that framework to move them faster.’

‘I think he’s right,’ said Nayl.

‘I think he’s writing a frigging paper on them,’ growled Macks.

‘Keep moving,’ said Nayl.

They followed the catwalk over a massive, spinning drum of brass, then ascended another staircase to the next gantry. Voriet was struggling to keep pace. Twice, he slipped and cried out as his broken arm struck the handrail.

Another figure was waiting for them on the gantry. It was just dry, white bones. Green swirls of light imaged the organs missing from its torso. It shuffled towards them, feet dragging.

Drusher raised his sidearm.

‘Don’t waste a round,’ said Nayl, grabbing his arm. ‘We can outrun this one.’

They left it behind, hustling Voriet along, and took another flight of stairs up to a wide catwalk that circled the base of a huge, burnished gyroscope.

‘Oh Terra!’ Macks exclaimed.

Another figure was pacing inexorably towards them. Its face had been blown away by point-blank shots.

But it was Hadeed Garofar.

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TWENTY-ONE

A Very Suitable Candidate

In his cage, on his knees, his head tipped back, Magos Sark crooned un-words into the gulfs of the empyrean, and the words echoed back like the chirring of a trillion insects. The light flooding the tower was coming from inside him, so bright his skin was translucent, and Gobleka was sure he could see the shadow of the magos' skeleton.

Gobleka stood at the edge of the platform for a while, watching. The un-words stirred something primordial in him, as if some deep and vestigial part of his lizard brain was responding. It was the language of infinity, the prehuman, inhuman instructions for creation and negation. He tried to mouth the un-words he heard, to copy and repeat them, to learn them, but they were coming too fast.

They always did. He had tried before, almost every time Sark had started the Loom and begun to weave. Gobleka had never managed to learn any un-words that way. He'd always ended up with a nosebleed or a savage tension headache. The futile effort to learn had, over time, only done one thing. It had changed the colour of his eyes.

The few words Goran Gobleka did know, the few commands of power, had been taught to him by Lilean Chase, and each syllable had taken many painful weeks to master.

Gobleka realised he had been standing on the gantry for too long. The skin of his cheeks and brow was tingling and sore, as though he had been out in a strong sun. He'd been looking at the light for longer than he should have. He knew from experience that word-burn could be more painful than sunburn.

He picked up his autorifle and went down a small curved staircase to the monitor station, set up on a platform below and to the side of the main

gantry. He checked the displays of the cogitators. Sark's psychometrics and vitals were off the chart, the former too high and the latter too low, but that was fairly standard when an act of weaving was in progress. Other cogitators were trying to map and decipher the sounds coming from the magos, but their readings were void. Again, that was normal. The Cognitae had procured the most powerful cogitators possible, some taken by force from a Mechanicus facility in the Thracian System, but even these could not cope with the energy and raw data they had been set up to process.

Gobleka wondered how long Sark would last. No human body should have survived the extremes he had endured over the years. Indeed, none had prior to Sark. As a junior adept at Keshtre in the early days, Gobleka had often been tasked with hosing out the cage after a failed trial.

Sark should have died the first time he tried to harness the Loom. He certainly shouldn't have been able to survive the many weavings he had conducted. But then, Gobleka was certain that the process had altered Sark in fundamental ways. Sark had ceased to be remotely human a long time ago.

What did that make him? A god? A daemon? A eudaemonic spirit? Gobleka was sometimes convinced that Sark's soul had burned out years before, and something else, some etheric sentience, had taken up residence inside him, wearing Sark's flesh like a borrowed coat. During the brief moments he became lucid, Sark always begged to be let out of the cage. Gobleka wasn't sure it was Sark talking. It wasn't the magos pleading to be let out of the metal cage, it was the thing inside him whining to be let out of the coat of flesh it was clothed in.

Now, even the coat was wearing out. They needed a viable replacement, especially if they were going to honour the King's request to increase productivity.

Gobleka heard footsteps on the metal stairs behind him, despite the roar of the Loom.

Davinch was ascending to the control platform, half dragging a heavysset man in a black coat. The man's hands were cuffed in front of him, and he was hunched over in pain. Davinch was all but having to force him to walk.

But Davinch had a supremely satisfied look on his scrawny, tattooed face.

'I got him,' he said.

Gobleka walked over. The man in the black coat was standing with his shoulders down and his head bent forwards. He was breathing hard as if he had just run a marathon. Gobleka saw blood dripping from his hands and from the chain of his cuffs.

Gobleka reached out, grabbed the man by the jaw and forced his head up so he could look him in the eyes.

Eisenhorn. The great and mighty Gregor Eisenhorn. His eyes were dead and lifeless. His skin was pale and blotchy, and blood ran from his nose. He was having trouble breathing. Gobleka looked him up and down, and saw the years of scar tissue, the old augmetics under the coat, the leg braces and strapped servo-reinforcement. The man was withered and broken, and had been long before Davinch had got his murderous hands on him.

‘I’ve looked forward to this moment,’ said Gobleka. ‘Imagined it, you know. What I’d say, what you’d say. All that. But you’re a lot less than I expected. Damaged and weak. And old. Bit of a disappointment, really.’

‘Imagine,’ replied Eisenhorn, grunting the words out between rasping breaths, ‘imagine how little I care.’

‘Ooh!’ grinned Gobleka, play-acting scared. ‘Still got it, have you? Still got the old edge, eh? Or that’s what you’d like to think. Give me some more, so I can tell people afterwards that breaking you was noble labour, not a piece of piss.’

Eisenhorn didn’t reply.

‘Where’s the blood coming from?’ Gobleka asked Davinch.

‘Blayg plugged him,’ Davinch replied. ‘Body shot.’

‘Did you patch it?’

‘I didn’t have a med-pack with me,’ said Davinch.

‘Well, get one, now,’ said Gobleka. ‘And get the kit too.’

Davinch nodded and moved to the lockers at the end of the bank of cogitators.

‘Where is Blayg?’ Gobleka called out as he stood studying Eisenhorn.

‘Head shot,’ replied Davinch, sorting through supplies.

‘Have you seen Streekal?’

‘Not a sign,’ Davinch replied. He came back with a trauma pack. Gobleka opened it, took out a tube of wound sealant and rammed the applicator nozzle into the glistening hole in Eisenhorn’s abdomen. Eisenhorn winced, but remained on his feet.

Gobleka pressed the activator and pumped sealant into the wound. Then he walked around Eisenhorn, yanked up his old, black coat and did the same to the exit wound.

He tossed the tube back to Davinch.

‘I said get the kit, Davinch,’ he snapped. ‘So, get the kit.’

Davinch hurried back to the lockers. Gobleka peered into Eisenhorn’s eyes. Eisenhorn just glared into the distance and ignored the eerie violet eyes fixing him.

‘Did you search him?’ Gobleka asked.

‘Of course,’ Davinch called back. ‘A few bits and pieces. A back-up gun in his chest rig. I took that.’

‘Now, what’s going to happen,’ Gobleka said to Eisenhorn, standing so close they were nose-to-nose, ‘is that I’m going to help you. That’s a surprise, isn’t it? I’m going to keep you alive. I’m going to take the pain away. *All* the pain, physical and mental. That frigged-up psyker mind of yours must be ready to burst by now, right?’

Eisenhorn said nothing.

‘This is a big day for you, you know?’ said Gobleka. ‘Think of it like... think of it like this is what your entire life has been about. Everything you are, everything you’ve ever done, leading up to this moment. Right here.’

‘I think he was trying to trick us,’ said Davinch, returning with the kit. ‘You know? Like... get caught. He knew he couldn’t get past us, so I think he figured he’d let us take him so he could pull some stunt once he was here.’

‘Is that it?’ Gobleka asked Eisenhorn sidelong as he prepped an injector. ‘That didn’t work out so well, did it? If that was your plan, it turned into all kinds of shit, didn’t it? And there’s no one to bail you out, either. They’re all dead. You understand that, don’t you? They’re all dead, all your followers and associates. And if they’re not, they will be soon. The magos is hunting them down, any that are left. His instruments are loose in the tower. Your friends, Gregor Eisenhorn, you’ve brought them to a very, very bad end, you know that? If there are any left alive, which I very much frigging doubt, their deaths will be the most awful thing you can imagine. I bet they wish they’d never signed on. I bet they wish they’d never followed you, and never trusted that you knew what you were doing. You know, I bet their last living thought is hate. Hate for you. Hate for getting them into this mess. Your friends will die *hating* you for—’

‘They’re not my friends,’ said Eisenhower.

Gobleka grinned, and checked the dose-load of the injector. ‘Oh, I don’t think that’s true. You’ve got to be a man’s friend to follow him into hell.’

Eisenhower turned his head, slowly, and looked at Davinch.

‘He follows you,’ he said.

‘Davinch?’ Gobleka laughed. ‘He’s paid to. Paid very well. Besides, he sees the bigger picture. The great reward awaiting all those who participate.’

‘So do the people who follow me,’ said Eisenhower.

‘Do they?’ asked Gobleka. ‘Do they really? Did you ever tell them, your friends, that you lied to them? That you’re mad and outlawed and obsessed? That the path you walk is one of pain, and it’s untrue? That your cause is doomed, and everyone knows it? Even the Rot-God-King. Your side is the *losing* side. You follow the False Emperor, Eisenhower. You pledged your life to Him. You backed the wrong side in this struggle. And that’s just a fact.’

‘We’ll agree to disagree,’ growled Eisenhower.

‘No,’ said Gobleka. ‘From day one, since before the Emperor was the Emperor, it was always going to go this way. Ordained, predicted, projected, prophesied. Chaos will always prevail. It’s a universal law. Order does not endure. Chaos overwhelms. Entropy, Eisenhower. All systems break down eventually. Everything wears out, everything falls apart. The universe returns to its preordained natural state, and that’s Chaos, forever and always.’

Eisenhower remained silent.

‘You don’t have to take my word for it,’ said Gobleka. ‘I’m going to show you. That’s part of my gift to you today. I’m going to share the truth with you, the truth that’s always been, so you can see it and know it for yourself. The scales will fall from your eyes, man, and you will think yourself such a fool to have believed otherwise.’

‘You don’t know me very well, do you?’ asked Eisenhower.

‘See this?’ asked Gobleka, raising the injector. ‘Sark’s masterpiece. An engineered viral inoculant. A miraculous thing. He isolated it from samples collected by his grandfather—’

‘The Torment,’ said Eisenhower.

Gobleka grinned. ‘A man of learning! Yes, the Torment. Uhlren’s Pox. It had so many wonderful names. A gift of the warp, a pestilence like no

other. This is inert, of course. An antigenic Sark engineered from the original pathogen. It won't kill you. Well, it probably won't. It will transform you... what you are... how you think. It will remake you in wonderful ways. The way Sark remade himself so he could operate the Loom.'

'Why?' asked Eisenhower.

'Why what?'

'Why are you giving it to me?'

'Well,' said Gobleka, 'for one it will transfigure you and allow you to see the truth, and—'

'Make me, what? Join you?' asked Eisenhower.

'Pretty much,' laughed Davinch.

'That won't work,' said Eisenhower.

'Ah,' said Gobleka. 'Of course. Because of your infamous willpower. Your will, so firm and unshakeable that no temptation or malice can topple it. Eisenhower, listen... I may have mocked you, but I'm not an idiot. I know you're a man of considerable talents and abilities. Your career shows that. You have particular strengths and skills that could make you very useful to us. To Lilean. Not in your present state, of course. I know you'd never join us. I respect that, even. But this isn't a choice you're going to make.'

Eisenhower glared at him.

'Seriously,' said Gobleka. 'The Torment antigenic is horrible. This will hurt. Most subjects do not survive. Only Magos Sark has ever lived through more than one shot of it. But I think you will, simply because you're so strong. And the inoculant, once it's scorching through your system, will have plenty to work with. That psyker mind of yours, for example. You have walked in the dark for too many years, exposed your psi-active mind to the warp. It's left its imprint on you. You are an... etheric sensitive, far closer in nature to the creatures you hunt than you'd ever care to admit. You are ripe and ready. A very suitable candidate.'

'Where do you want it?' Davinch asked.

'Throat,' replied Gobleka. He looked back at Eisenhower.

'Forget your will,' he said. 'Forget resisting. It's not a matter of that. The Torment antigenic will modify you, alter your entire state of being. You will see the warp and *be* the warp, and that will be all. It won't be a matter of accepting it. It will simply be true.'

‘You’re very certain of these things you keep describing as facts,’ said Eisenhower.

‘It’s my job,’ said Gobleka. ‘My service to Orpheus, the King in Yellow. He trusts me to get it right.’

He glanced at Davinch.

‘Hold him steady,’ he ordered.

Davinch closed in, reaching up to drag Eisenhower’s collar down and expose his throat. Gobleka stepped forwards with the injector.

Eisenhorn’s hands were cuffed with military-issue binders. He couldn’t pull them apart, so he clenched them together instead, fingers intertwined. As Davinch closed in to seize him, he swung his fists like a club into the tattooed man’s gut.

He was not as tired and weak as they had presumed.

Davinch barked out air and doubled up. Eisenhower brought his hands down, now separated, so that the cuff-chain hooked around the back of Davinch’s neck. He slammed down, driving Davinch’s face into the metal bracing of his rising kneecap.

Bone cracked. Davinch fell away, moaning and choking. Gobleka was lunging in with the injector.

Every movement hurt. Eisenhower’s gut wound was severe, and just moving abruptly, raising his knee to take down Davinch, had torn the traumatised wound and broken the sealant packing. He felt blood suddenly spill down his back.

He raised both arms and blocked Gobleka. Gobleka was bigger than him and much stronger. He elbowed Eisenhower’s block aside and punched him in the jaw. Eisenhower staggered a few steps, inadvertently stepping on Davinch’s splayed fingers. Davinch was down on his hands and knees, trying to recover. He yelled in pain as Eisenhower’s iron-shod boot crunched across his hand.

Eisenhorn turned and kicked Davinch in the rump, throwing him flat on the deck in Gobleka’s path. Gobleka vaulted the fallen man deftly and came at Eisenhower again. With his hands cuffed, Eisenhower could only upper-block to one side or the other. Gobleka feinted a punch from the left then kicked hard with his right foot. The kick hit Eisenhower in the hip, but his bracing armature took most of the force. Eisenhower swung his fists at Gobleka, but the man leaned out of the swing, then lunged in and caught the chain of Eisenhower’s cuffs with his left hand. He wrenched Eisenhower’s

hands and arms down and to the side. Eisenhower had no choice but to twist away, exposing his neck to the injector Gobleka was stabbing in with his other hand.

There was no point fighting Gobleka's haul on the cuff-chain. Eisenhower went with it instead, allowing himself to be dragged down. He ducked into the stabbing motion and rammed his shoulder into Gobleka's chest.

Gobleka stumbled backwards, cursing. He had dropped the injector. He reached for it. Eisenhower kicked it further along the deck.

'Is this it?' Gobleka taunted him angrily. 'Is this the trick you were going to pull? The stunt you were waiting to play?'

'Seems to be working,' growled Eisenhower.

Gobleka sprang at him. Eisenhower blocked again with both forearms, then swung his fists together hard. He caught Gobleka's bearded jaw and knocked him sideways across the platform. Gobleka crashed into the bank of cogitators. A screen smashed. Data-slates tumbled to the deck.

'Frigging help me, you idiot!' Gobleka yelled at Davinch.

Davinch was getting up. His nose and lips were a mangled mask of blood. He spat, drawing one of his laspistols.

'Don't kill him,' Gobleka ordered.

The tattooed man cursed aloud and went for Eisenhower. He twisted the laspistol in his grip and began to beat at Eisenhower with the weapon's butt. Eisenhower tried to evade. He raised his chained fists to deflect the blows. Davinch kept hitting. Eisenhower ducked low and hooked the cuff-chain around Davinch's elbow. Eisenhower locked his fingers and swung, throwing Davinch off his feet.

He landed hard. Eisenhower kicked him to keep him down and unlaced his fingers, freeing his cuffed hands from the man's arm. But Gobleka had grabbed him from behind. He had the injector again.

Eisenhower tried to tear himself away. Gobleka stabbed in with the needle. Eisenhower got his hands up, trying to block. The injector's needle wedged in the taut loops of the cuff-chain, centimetres from Eisenhower's throat.

Eisenhower twisted his wrists, and the cuffs plucked the injector out of Gobleka's hands. It went flying down the platform.

Gobleka broke off and turned to run for it. Eisenhower moved after him, but was tackled from the side by Davinch. Together, they slammed into the cogitator bank. They grappled. Teeth gritted, hissing blood, Davinch clamped his hand around the back of Eisenhower's head and rammed his face

into the edge of a cogitator's casing. Eisenhower stamped back into Davinch's shin. As the man screamed in pain, Eisenhower rotated, grabbed him by the front of his jacket and heaved him into the bank of screens. Another shattered, billowing sparks.

Eisenhorn had his weight on him. Davinch couldn't pivot. He reached up and clawed at Eisenhower's throat. He got a grip and began to throttle, his fingers biting into Eisenhower's neck. Eisenhower let himself be pulled down. He let go of the tattooed man's jacket and allowed his hands to slide up the man's chest, until he had a hand on either side of the man's neck. The cuff-chain bit down into Davinch's throat. Davinch started to splutter and choke, spitting gobs of blood. His legs milled wildly. He let go of Eisenhower's neck and began to pummel frantically.

Eisenhorn knew he didn't have time to finish the kill. Gobleka was coming in again from behind. He grabbed Davinch by the shoulders, pulled the thrashing man around and smashed his head backwards through a cogitator screen.

Davinch slithered out of the unit in a shower of broken glass and tubing valves, and fell sideways onto the deck.

Eisenhorn turned to meet Gobleka. Gobleka circled, head low, tossing the injector from hand to hand like a knife, daring Eisenhower with each hand. He dummied, then lunged, the injector in his right hand. Eisenhower sidestepped and tried to sweep Gobleka into an over-extension with his cuffed hands. But Gobleka was surefooted, and he shoulder-barged Eisenhower in the belly. He carried him backwards and drove his spine into the platform's handrail.

Searing pain flared from the exit wound as it hit the rail. Eisenhower gasped. Gobleka drove him again, then threw a low punch into his gut to agonise the entry wound as well. Eisenhower stumbled sideways, flailing with his cuffed hands, trying to keep Gobleka at bay.

'We're done, you old bastard,' said Gobleka, panting, and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He hawked and spat on the deck. 'All done now.'

Eisenhorn swayed, leaning on the handrail to stay upright. He clawed with his cuffed hands and found the injector sticking out of his neck. He tried to pull it out. His fingers were numb and wouldn't work properly.

He fell to one knee, gasping. He finally managed to yank the injector out, but he could see it was empty.

He looked up at Gobleka. Davinch hobbled into view, dripping blood. He clutched Gobleka's shoulder for support.

'You get him?' he asked through swollen lips.

'I got him,' said Gobleka.

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TWENTY-TWO

Sark's Instruments

‘Look away,’ said Drusher simply. He grabbed Macks, pushed her face into his shoulder, and fired. The shot went through Hadeed Garofar’s chest. The pinpricks of emerald light in what had once been the deputy’s eyes went out. His body fell back hard on the catwalk decking.

Macks looked up at Drusher. Her eyes were streaming with tears.

‘Those bastards,’ she whispered. ‘I am going to kill *all* of them.’

‘Keep moving! Keep moving!’ Voriet yelled.

More animations were approaching around the curved catwalk. One was a rotting thing, the others, two skeletal horrors that looked like they had been burned and fused. All crackled with green electricity. They all advanced slowly, one halting step at a time, but a fourth appeared behind them. It was Deputy Edde. Her eyes were blank, and her throat was a black mess of clotted blood.

She pushed past the skeletal things, advancing swiftly, with expressionless determination.

‘Go!’ shouted Nayl. He knocked Edde down with a single shot, then turned to run after the others. Drusher and Macks were almost carrying Voriet. He was murmuring in pain from the vigorous motion. There was no time to be gentle about it.

They came around the curve of the catwalk. There were two more animations right in front of them. One, the closest, was a stained brown skeleton draped in tatters of skin and disintegrating clothes. The other, a woman, was a mangled nightmare that looked like it had been systematically pulped with a hammer.

She was moving faster, blood leaking from her ruptured flesh. Drusher fired, but he was hasty, and his shot went wide. He fired again, and the

mangled thing dropped bonelessly onto the deck.

But the skeletal animation was right on them. Macks yelled and shoved Drusher and Voriet out of the way. Voriet fell hard, jolting his arm and shrieking. The skeletal thing reached for Macks, clawing, but she evaded and turned her dive into a tumble that took her out from under its swinging arm. It turned instead on the helpless Voriet. Soil-caked finger bones grasped at him, flickering with the lambent ghosts of the flesh and tendons that had once been there. Voriet tried to crawl out of its path, dragging urgently with his working arm.

Drusher shot it point-blank through the back of the skull. The cranium exploded in a shower of bone shards and old loam, and the entire skeleton disarticulated, falling in an avalanche of disjointed pieces.

Nayl hauled Voriet to his feet.

‘The stairs!’ he barked. There was a long ascending flight to the next platform level further down the curve of the catwalk. Macks grabbed Drusher by the hand, and they started to run. Ahead and behind them, they could see more animations: slow plodding things of bone and faster, striding things that still had some or all of their soft tissue. The closest was a grim cadaver with an arm missing. Ghostly green light flickered an afterimage of where the limb had been.

Drusher shot it in the chest. He turned his aim towards the other advancing animations.

‘No, magos. We can make it,’ Nayl advised. He had Voriet hoisted over his shoulder. ‘Don’t waste any more rounds.’

‘All right,’ Drusher agreed.

‘How many have you got left?’ asked Nayl.

‘I don’t know. How many fit into one of these?’

‘Eight,’ snapped Nayl. ‘How many did you fire?’

‘I have no idea! Stop asking me questions!’ Drusher replied.

‘How many have you got left, Nayl?’ asked Macks.

They had reached the foot of the stairs. The nearest animations were rushing to block them, marching briskly, like passengers late for a transit. One was a woman with part of her face missing. The other was a man who had no head at all.

Nayl put a careful shot into each of them. They toppled.

‘How many *shots*, Nayl?’ Macks roared.

‘Now?’ Nayl replied. ‘None.’

They ran up the stairs. It was a long flight, straight up to the next level. Drusher and Macks led the way, with Nayl lagging behind supporting Voriet. Animations were closing in at the stair foot.

From somewhere very high above, somewhere up in the sickly light, they heard a scream. The sound of a man in unbearable anguish. It rang out for several moments above the din of the working Loom, then faded.

‘That was him,’ said Nayl, a look of horror on his face.

‘Eisenhorn?’ asked Macks, looking back at him.

Voriet nodded.

‘I think Harlon’s right,’ he said.

‘We keep going anyway,’ insisted Drusher. He took another couple of steps, looked up and saw a hunched, stained skeleton looking down at him from the top of the steps. Jade light glinted in its vacant orbits. It began to step towards them.

‘Back?’ he said.

‘They’re already on the stairs,’ Nayl shouted.

Drusher raised his pistol and fired. The shot clipped the animation’s head, above the left eye, splintering bone, and almost swung the skull around through a hundred and eighty degrees. The animating force in it broke and died, and the bones collapsed and tumbled down the steps. Some dropped over the edge through the rails. Macks and Drusher flinched to avoid the ones that bounced past their feet.

‘Get moving!’ Nayl shouted from behind them. They started to run. Drusher wondered what else might be waiting for them at the top.

‘What does it mean when a gun does this?’ he asked, showing the pistol to Macks as they took the steps two at a time. The slide was jammed and locked all the way back.

‘It means it’s empty,’ she replied.

She looked back at Nayl.

‘Nayl, we’re all out of specials,’ she cried.

‘Damn,’ said Nayl.

‘Nayl!’ she cried. She’d seen something behind him.

The animations were already ascending after them, the slower ones hobbling one step at a time. But one was moving fast, much faster than the others. It was pushing past them, scrambling after the four fleeing humans.

It was lithe, jet-black and gleaming. Macks realised that its strange appearance was simply because it was covered, head to foot, in promethium

residue.

It was Streekal. The oil filming her staring eyes was backlit by the green glow inside her head, like the rangefinder in a battlesuit's visor. Her mouth was open and slack, and viscous ropes of promethium drooled out of it.

'Move! Move! Move!' yelled Nayl. He wasn't sure if he and Voriet could reach the top of the stairs before Streekal reached them. But he knew for sure that even if they did, they no longer had any way of stopping her.

They ran for the top of the stairs. Nayl picked up Voriet again. Drusher and Macks reached the top. They looked around. There was nothing on the platform, no horrors looming to grab at them.

They turned.

'Nayl! Run!' Drusher yelled. He unlocked the slide and fired his pistol at Streekal, hoping Macks was wrong. The snub simply clicked dry.

'Come on! Come on!' he yelled.

'Just get clear!' Nayl roared back, straining at his limit to run and carry the interrogator. Streekal was only twenty steps behind them, ploughing up the stairs tirelessly, the light gleaming off her oil-swathed form.

Macks drew her laspistol.

'That won't do any good,' Drusher yelled at her. 'Haven't you got the hang of this yet? Normal fire won't—'

'Shut up!' she cried. She was fiddling frantically with the weapon, unlocking and resetting the powercell. With a snap of her wrist, she pulled a connector loose then rammed the energy clip back in.

Nayl and Voriet reached the top of the stairs. Drusher grabbed them and hauled them onto the platform so violently, all three fell sprawling together.

Macks turned to face the oncoming Streekal. The glistening black figure was only a few metres away. She could see the oil welling out of Streekal's open mouth and spattering down her chest.

Macks dropped the laspistol onto the top step.

'Everybody down!' she yelled, throwing herself clear.

Drusher heard a high-pitched whine. It got fiercer and louder. A warning signal. Macks had rigged the pistol's energy clip to overload and discharge.

Streekal reached the top five steps. The pistol detonated like a small bomb, releasing all of its significant charge in one bright flash of energy. The blinding explosion blew the weapon apart and took the upper three steps of the staircase with it. Metal shattered. Handrails buckled and spun away. The expanding ball of heat and light enveloped Streekal.

It didn't harm her at all. But the promethium vapour fuming around her ignited. She was engulfed in a sheet of flame, becoming a burning effigy of a human figure.

She kept moving, but the top of the staircase, wrecked by the blast, was shearing away from the platform. The entire stair structure broke away from the top, dipping slowly and catastrophically into space, spilling the animations, fast and slow alike, off its collapsing length. They dropped away into the darkness below, some glancing and bouncing off the gears and struts of the whirring machine.

The staircase broke off at the base, wrenching away from the catwalk supports, and tumbled after the things it had shrugged off into the air. It fell, grinding and screeching, bending and crumpling.

Streekal fell, arms and legs moving uselessly.

Like a comet, trailing fire, she dropped into the depths. The flames of her descent were visible long after all the other plummeting animations had vanished from view.

Then her light vanished too. She had gone back where she had come from, down to the very base of Keshtre's tower.

'Holy Throne,' breathed Drusher, looking down.

Far below, the darkness winked and flickered. There was a sudden glow, red and dull, that swiftly grew brighter and more fierce.

The promethium sump at the base of the tower had ignited.



TWENTY-THREE

The Torment

The fire had been burning for a while. At first, it was far away, down in the darkness where no one could see it, just a dull red glow, roiling in the blackness. It looked as though it would never be serious, never really catch hold, that it would burn itself out and grow cold.

But fire has been deceiving man since it was first given to him by the gods. Or since he first stole it from them. Stories differ. The only truth that matters is that fire likes to betray. It has burned man's hand since first he took possession of it. When he thinks it is extinguished, it leaps back into life and reveals itself in fury, suddenly overwhelming, all-consuming and too strong to fight.

So with this fire. From the dullest glow to a seething inferno, from nothing to everything in the beat of a heart, taking hold, devouring all, leaving nothing but ashes.

Its heat was upon him, stifling him. Its light was in his eyes. His skin was blistering and flaking. His bones were beginning to fuse and melt.

He heard the constant rattling of the Loom, spinning towards eternity, despite the conflagration that enveloped it. But the noise of the Loom and the roaring rush of the fire were both drowned out by the chirring in the air. The clicking whispers. The sound of a trillion invisible insects stridulating in the back of his mind.

He could bear the heat no longer. He was being burned away. The door to the dark room was open, and hard sunlight shafted in from outside. Despite its glare, the light looked cool compared to the flames that lit him from head to toe.

He got up to reach for it. He pulled his burning body from the rough cot to claw at the light.

‘Stay still,’ the robed man said gently.

‘I burn...’ he gasped.

‘It is the Torment,’ the man told him. ‘I’m sorry, this is what it does. We have tried many things to ease the pain. Stasis fields. Ice baths. Opiates. Induced coma. Other victims have told me that it burns like hell’s fury even in their dreams.’

‘Is this a dream?’ he asked. His voice was small, without substance, like burning paper lifting into the air as it crisped away.

‘I’m sorry, no,’ said the robed man. ‘Lie back. You are too weak.’

‘I will get up,’ he insisted. He hauled himself up. The robed man reached to steady him. Why aren’t you burning, he thought. I am on fire, you touch me, your hands are on me. Why aren’t you burning too?

He shuffled to the open door. The robed man supported him.

‘I don’t know your name,’ the robed man said. ‘You were brought to us in.... in this condition. You carried no identity. These are the first words you have spoken.’

‘I... My name... is Gregor. Gregor Eisenhorn.’

‘I will do all I can to help you, Gregor Eisenhorn,’ the robed man said softly.

They stepped out into the light. The air was humid. He could see the deep blue sky above. He could smell the sea. Beyond the old stone walls of the garden, lush green vegetation rose, the skirts of a rainforest that blanketed the sheer flanks of the volcanic flue that stood in the distance, a ghost in the heat-haze.

The chirring of the insects was louder. Uncountable insects chirping in the jungle thickets beyond the ancient walls.

‘Where is this?’ Eisenhorn asked, squinting in the bright sunlight. ‘Is this some other part of Keshtre?’

‘I don’t know where that is,’ said the robed man. His robes were pure white. His skin was very dark. ‘I haven’t heard of it. Is it where you were?’

‘Then... have I folded again?’ Eisenhorn asked. ‘Is this another estimate overlap?’

‘I’m sorry, my friend,’ the robed man said. ‘I do not understand the terms you use. Gregor, your fever is so high it cannot be measured. You are hallucinating, I think. Hallucinating and confused. You have contracted a pestilence. It is called Uhlren’s Pox. It is severe, I’m sorry to say. Your confusion is part of the illness. I should return you to your bed.’

Eisenhorn looked at him.

‘Are you one of Gobleka’s people?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know the name, Gregor.’

‘Are you a doctor? A medicae?’

‘I care for those who come here,’ the robed man said. ‘I am Baptrice.’

Eisenhorn looked around the garden. His raised voice had attracted attention. Three sisters in stark-white robes and starched bicorn wimples observed him with concern. A grizzled old man sat on a garden seat beside the wall. He was naked except for an old ammunition belt, and his left arm was nothing but a mass of old scar tissue. He was putting brass shell-cases into the loops of the bandolier and then taking them out again, counting each time. ‘...six, seven, *eight*... six, seven, *eight*.’

‘What is this place?’ Eisenhorn asked.

‘The Hospice of Saint Bastian,’ the robed man said.

‘On... Symbal Iota?’ Eisenhorn asked.

‘Yes,’ said Baptrice. ‘You know where you are, then?’

‘What... year? What year is it, sir?’

‘Gregor, it is the third year of the Genovingian Campaign and—’

Eisenhorn broke free of his hands and walked out onto the lawn. The insects were so loud.

‘Gregor?’ called Baptrice. ‘You are lucid. I have never seen such lucidity in a patient so tight in the grip of the Torment. I would like you to speak with someone, if you are able. He might learn a great deal from you.’

‘Who?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘His name is Sark,’ said Baptrice.

‘Draven Sark?’

‘No, sir,’ said Baptrice, frowning. ‘Lemual Sark. Higher Administrator Medica Lemual Sark. He is visiting us. His speciality is Materia Medica, and—’

‘I want to leave now,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘That cannot be permitted,’ said Baptrice sadly.

‘Why are you showing me this?’ Eisenhorn asked.

‘Showing you... what?’ asked Baptrice.

Eisenhorn wasn’t talking to him. He was staring down at his own hands. Old hands marked with old scars, hands that were dirty with soot and machine oil. Hands that were covered in yellow blisters from the fire that was eating him away.

‘Why are you showing me this?’ he asked the fire in his blood. ‘This is... this is your place of birth. Where you... where the truth of you crossed Sark’s path and the connection was made. Where the infection began. Carried not as a disease but as an idea, from father to son to grandson...’

‘Sisters!’ Baptrice called. There was worry in his voice. ‘Help me conduct this poor soul back to his confinement. He is delusional and very sick. I fear for his safety out here.’

The sisters approached. Their robes were ice-white, and their horned cowls trembled as they walked. There were more of them than before. Ten, fifteen...

‘Come, Gregor,’ said Baptrice. ‘Let me take you back. Let the fever run its course. There is hope yet.’

‘There was no patient with the Torment housed in this place,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘No outbreak occurred here at the hospice. It was an asylum. There was only a survivor. One man, an inmate who had survived the pandemic. I have read the reports. This is a lie. You are a lie.’

‘Help me with him,’ Baptrice smiled. The sisters closed around, their white bicorn wimples like tusks in the sunlight. More of them now, forty, fifty...

‘I want to leave,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Restrain him gently,’ Baptrice said. ‘He knows not what he says.’

The sisters surrounded him. There were more of them now than there were chirring insects in the jungle outside. Eisenhorn staggered through them, brushing aside their phantom hands and their snow-white robes. He started to walk, pushing them aside. Somewhere, a cloister bell began to ring. He reached the iron gate in the old garden wall. Beyond, the green darkness of the jungle swarmed with the fricative words of insects.

The flames swirled around him. He opened the gate and stumbled through.

‘I suppose you get a lot of cases like mine,’ sniffed the small man waiting for him on the other side of the desk.

‘Cases?’ asked Eisenhorn. The room was cool and grey, as if it were raining outside, or the place were always starved of light. There was a large, ornamental fireplace that clearly had not seen a fire in centuries, a rug on the wooden floor and two plain chairs on either side of the desk. The old man sat in one. A gilt clock stood on the mantle, ticking like an insect in a jungle thicket, steady and slow.

‘You may take a seat,’ the small man offered. ‘Of your own volition. You might as well be comfortable. We’re here to talk.’

Eisenhorn sat. The old man was shrivelled and bent, lost in the folds of his hand-me-down robes.

‘You get a lot of cases like mine,’ he sniffed.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Oh, you understand. You *understand*, sir. You just don’t care. And because you don’t care, you don’t remember.’

‘What am I supposed to remember?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘The people you have ruined,’ said the man. ‘How many is it? Lost count? I’m sure you remember the truly great ones. Pontius Glaw, you’d remember him. Stopping him was the making of you. Or was it the breaking? What about the others? The nondescript ones? The minor cases? The insignificant ones? The innocent? Do you remember them? Or are they just faces that passed you by? Do you remember me?’

‘I remember this room,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I remember that clock, ticking like—’

‘Oh, you remember the *room* do you? That’s nice,’ said the man. ‘Of course you remember this room. It’s where you brought them to. All of them. This room and a thousand like it. A room in which to talk. A room in which to slowly dismantle a man’s life. How many lives is it now? How many have you brought here? Not the notorious, vile ones, I mean the ones like me. The unfortunates. The ones who walked in off the street, troubled by some minor transgression, only to find they were going to be rendered down. Their pride. Their hopes. Their dreams. Their lives. Their livelihoods. Their possessions. Did you pause to care for any of them?’

‘I don’t remember *you*,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Rather my point, interrogator,’ the man said. ‘Is it interrogator still? It was then. I’m sure it isn’t any more. What are you now?’

‘Nothing,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Then we are turned about, sir,’ said the small man. ‘For last we met, I was nothing to you. My name is Imus. Does that stir anything?’

‘No.’

‘No, of course not. You have always been very good at your job, sir. Very good. You have excelled in your duties. Shall I tell you why?’

‘I feel you’re going to, Master Imus,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Because you never care,’ said Imus. ‘You are without compunction. This allows you to perform your duty with intense purpose. No sentiment gets in the way.’

‘Drusher said that,’ murmured Eisenhorn.

‘Drusher?’ asked Imus. ‘Friend of yours?’

‘No.’

Imus grinned.

‘I knew the answer would be no, you see,’ he said, ‘because you *have* no friends. No one comes close to you. You do not allow them to. A connection with another soul would be weakness. Which is why a hundred thousand people have passed through this room, and you have disassembled them all, and you cannot even remember their names. Now, this heartless bearing of yours explains why you are very good at what you do. But it begs the question... why do it at all?’

‘Why do it?’ Eisenhorn asked.

‘Yes, yes! Keep up. Why devote your life to the protection of mankind, when you cannot abide the close connection of another human being?’

‘Ordo service is hard,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘One must put aside certain things. One must stand apart and keep to the shadows. It—’

‘Poppycock,’ said Imus. He drummed his bony fingers on the desktop. ‘The Ruinous Powers, sir, in your expert opinion, are they a contaminant?’

‘Yes,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Like an infection? A disease? Once contracted, even from the briefest contact with a carrier, never cured?’

‘Yes,’ said Eisenhorn. The insect-tick of the clock was scratching at his mind. ‘It is the great horror of the warp. It never leaves a man once it has stained his hands. Corruption is inevitable.’

‘Yet you have touched it, sir.’

‘An obligation of my work,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘True,’ said Imus. ‘Also true, and a fact you know well... All inquisitors end. They are, by necessity, finite. The work they do... How can I put it? It *tarnishes* them. They are carriers. Infected with the torment of their duty. No matter how noble and dedicated, it gets them all in the end. Doesn’t it?’

‘The Inquisition has safeguards—’

‘Indeed it does,’ said Imus. ‘Retirement from active service. Restraint. Incarceration. The Inquisition watches itself. When one of its own goes too

far, becomes too lost, he is declared heretic as quickly and undeniably as any Archenemy rogue.'

'That's how it must be.'

'But you consider yourself an exception?' asked Imus.

'No, I...' Eisenhorn paused.

'You always knew the path you were walking. You knew the cost. You knew the inevitable—'

'I always accepted that.'

'But now you deny it,' said Imus. 'For so many years, sir, they tried to get you to stop. To retire before it was too late. Your friends – forgive me, I misspoke. The people you *described* as your friends, they all tried, didn't they? And you ignored them. Because you knew better. You overruled them. You cast them aside. They stopped being the people you described as friends. Some died, and you never cared. Some battled you to halt your progress, and you crushed them for it. And now you're here in this room. Even the Holy Ordos, which you claim to serve so dutifully, have declared you a heretic. *Diabolus extremis*. And yet, *they* are wrong. Because you know better. You will disregard their authority and carry on anyway, alone and friendless – though you always *were* – claiming to serve the Inquisition even though it no longer wants your service.'

'I know things that—'

Imus held up a hand so small and scrawny it looked like a bird's claw.

'No one's listening any more, sir,' he said. 'Not even you. Look at yourself – broken beyond measure, obsessed. Serving on for decades, beyond any point that is wise or healthy. Always driving forward because *you* know best. You serve mankind, but you have only contempt for the people who cross your path. You use people. You neglect any bonds that might be considered friendship and which constitute the foundation of humanity. You forget the faces and the names of those whose lives you change. People die for you, and you care not.'

Imus pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

'You should think about it, interrogator,' he said, 'why you do what you do.'

'I know why,' said Eisenhorn.

'The thing is, you poor fellow, you don't. And it's right there in front of you. The truth, staring you in the face. You're so good at finding the truth, yet you fail dismally to find it in yourself.'

‘And what is the truth, Master Imus?’ Eisenhorn snapped.

‘Look at yourself, sir, and tell me what *you* would call a man like you,’ said Imus.

Eisenhorn shifted in his seat uncomfortably. He looked at his hands and saw how badly they were seared. Blisters, contracture, third-degree burns, perhaps fourth.

From the fire inside him.

‘Sir?’ Imus called out. ‘Are you quite well? You look rather ill at ease.’

‘I’m... I’m burning,’ whispered Eisenhorn.

‘Like last time?’ asked Imus.

‘What?’

‘When last we sat together in this room, you caught fire. Head to foot. I was most terrified. The fire, it burned your skin and roasted the flesh off your bones until nothing was left, except a torched skull staring back at me.’

‘That wasn’t real,’ mumbled Eisenhorn.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ said Imus. ‘It was a trick. A wretched trick of your psyker mind. You did it to scare me, to make me quail. It worked, by Throne it worked. The most terrible thing, and I have never forgotten it, or forgiven you for scaring me like that. Do you remember why you did it?’

‘To elicit a response—’

‘To elicit a response!’ cried Imus. He smiled and opened the glass front of the clock on the mantle. ‘That’s it exactly. You did it to scare the crap out of me, pardon my language. It was intimidation. Bullying. You’ve done that your whole life. You did it to get at the truth. Do you remember what you said about that?’

‘N-no,’ said Eisenhorn, wracked with pain.

‘You said that fear simplifies the mind,’ said Imus. ‘You said it is so strong and pure, it empties the head and removes all barriers and falsehoods. You scared me so you could read the truth inside me, the honest part of me that I could not dissemble.’

‘It was a technique,’ replied Eisenhorn, fighting to remain conscious. He rose to his feet, found he was too unsteady and sat down again. ‘A standard ordo technique. Just a mind-trick. The fire burning me is real.’

Imus craned his reedy neck and peered at the face of the clock. He began to adjust the hands.

‘Real?’ he asked, as if only half listening. ‘What’s real? Look at us, here, in this room. What’s real about that? It’s just another technique. Another mind-trick. Another phantom fire to burn through to the truth. To... How did you put it? Empty your head and remove all barriers and falsehoods. Fear, sir, to simplify the mind.’

‘No,’ said Eisenhorn. He took a deep breath. A shadow seemed to have passed over what little daylight existed outside, and the room was darker than ever. ‘It is the Torment. The antigenic at work. It’s a hallucination. Sark designed the inoculant to condition the mind. To strip away the will. To brainwash—’

‘No, he didn’t,’ said Imus mildly. ‘That’s not really what it does. It doesn’t make you think differently, sir. It makes you think *truly*. It burns away all the psychological armour and rationalisations and excuses a man has accumulated through his life, and shows him the truth that’s always lurked underneath it all. Like fear, it simplifies the mind.’

Eisenhorn rested his face in his hands, his elbows on the edge of the desk, and concentrated to control his breathing and moderate the agony.

‘I’m weary,’ he said, quietly, ‘of people telling me that I’ve... I’ve crossed some arbitrary line. It’s not the truth, and this... this delusion won’t convince me otherwise. You’re just an old memory, being used as a puppet by the Torment antigenic to get me to confess to something that isn’t true.’

‘Of course it isn’t true,’ said Imus. ‘You haven’t become a heretic. You are quite right to be resolute about that. Why, that absolute certainty is what helps you remain so defiant against accusations. You can conscientiously insist you have not become a heretic, no matter what your old masters say.’

Eisenhorn looked at the old man.

‘The real truth,’ said Imus, with a smile, ‘the thing we’ve met in this room to wrinkle out of you, is far more simple. Will you admit it to me?’

‘I don’t know what—’

‘Then I will say it,’ said Imus. ‘The warp has always been in you. Right from the start. It has called to you, and you have followed it. You wear the robes of an inquisitor to get close to it, and you finish any who dare compete with you for its affections. You are not a heretic because the Inquisition has *proclaimed* you one. You have not slowly *become* a heretic after years of stalking the dark. You have *always* been one.’

Imus grinned at Eisenhorn.

‘You must know that’s the case,’ Imus said. ‘Well, you must get a lot of cases like yours. You came to this place of your own volition. You know what happens in this room. You have always been a heretic, Gregor Eisenhorn. You simply haven’t ever had the clarity to recognise the fact. You do now. The barriers are burned down. Fear has simplified your mind. You cannot dissemble.’

‘No,’ said Eisenhorn. He rose to his feet.

‘Come now, don’t threaten me,’ said Imus. He finished adjusting the clock and closed its case. ‘I’ve been dead for two hundred years. You, you have never lived. You do not walk in darkness. You *are* darkness. It’s always been too late to turn back. It’s in your blood. Like a fire that won’t go out. You should accept it. That’s what you told me and a hundred thousand like me. Accept your transgression and you will find relief. A burden lifted. Embrace it. The warp is your only friend, and it’s been waiting for you for a long time.’

Eisenhorn felt the flames rise up, eating at him eagerly.

‘This is trickery,’ he insisted. ‘Fever—’

‘No,’ replied Imus. ‘It’s the truth, which is always the most painful thing of all. End your torment, sir. Accept what you are. Acknowledge what you have always been. The pain will be brief. Beyond the pain, why... it is so very beautiful.’

Eisenhorn shook his head. Fire was gnawing his bones away.

‘You think the warp is your enemy,’ said Imus. ‘But it’s the only true thing there is. The one constant. Your only friend. Species rise and fall, Imperiums come and go. The warp remains. Bow down and let it take you. It’s what you’ve always secretly wanted.’

The door banged open.

‘Will this take much longer, Gregor?’ asked Titus Endor. ‘I’ve got things planned.’

Imus sniffed and looked at the clock.

‘About time,’ he murmured. ‘I was getting bored of this.’

Endor drew his autosnub and shot four rounds into the old man. Imus fell into the fireplace and smashed into a hundred thousand fragments of old Sameterware pottery.

‘Come on,’ said Endor, grinning. ‘There’s still time to get out. There’s always time to get out.’

He took Eisenhorn by the arm and hustled him out of the gloomy room.

‘You’ll burn yourself,’ Eisenhorn said, looking down at Endor’s hand gripping him.

‘Anything for a friend,’ laughed Endor. ‘You and me, through thick and thin. You knew I’d always come back, if you needed help.’

‘From the dead?’

Endor halted and turned to face Eisenhorn. He put his hands on Eisenhorn’s shivering shoulders and looked into his eyes, serious and sober.

‘Is this about the thing?’ Endor asked. ‘The... business? It turned things bad between us, I know. Tell me you’ve forgiven me. You *must* have forgiven me by now. It wasn’t my fault, you know? Just circumstances.’

Eisenhorn looked away. He couldn’t meet Endor’s urgent gaze any more. There were things in Endor’s eyes, writhing worm-things like larvae that pressed against the glossy windows of Endor’s eyeballs.

He looked around instead. A huge full moon, the colour of flame, was rising over the desert flats. The vast sky was woad-blue, speckled with stars. The endless sands were turmeric-yellow. There wasn’t a building around for a hundred kilometres.

‘Is this another stage of the fever?’ he asked.

‘The what?’ asked Endor. He began to walk, his boots kicking up fine dust from the soft yellow sand.

‘Another part of—’

‘Look, forget it, Gregor, will you?’ Endor said. ‘I let you down. I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry. Can we leave that business behind us? Come on, I’ve come to get you out of there.’

‘You shouldn’t consort with me,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I will destroy you.’

‘I don’t need you for that,’ snorted Endor.

‘I am disavowed and declared heretic.’

‘Well, you’ve always been a bit of a rogue—’

‘I mean it, Titus. The ordos have cast me out.’

‘They got rid of me too, you know,’ said Endor. ‘Said I was, you know, unreliable. Took my rosette. Put me out to pasture. What does it matter? I’ve known you a long time, Gregor. I know what you are.’

‘And what is that?’ asked Eisenhorn. A sweet desert breeze rose, and dust swirled between them like smoke.

‘A friend,’ replied Endor, with a smile and shrug.

‘I was never much of a friend to you,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Ah, I got used to you and your ways,’ said Endor.

‘I let you die,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I think... I think I knew you were sick. I suspected. I knew I couldn’t cure you, but I could have come to find you. Made your last years more comfortable.’

‘You could have done,’ said Endor. ‘But let’s face it, that’s not you, is it?’

‘And what *is* me?’

‘Throne alive,’ laughed Endor. ‘You’re maudlin already, and we haven’t even started drinking yet.’

‘What?’

‘Come on,’ said Endor. ‘I can see you’re thirsty. Let’s put that fire out, eh?’

Figures had gathered ahead of them, a small group seated on rugs and blankets, around a crackling bonfire, under the wide starlit purple of the desert evening. Eisenhorn could hear talking and laughter.

‘Look who I found!’ Endor announced. The figures looked up. Some laughed. One handed Endor a bottle.

‘About time you got here,’ said Midas Betancore. He was poking the fire with a stick. The campfire was built in a circle of broken stones, its flames and sparks roaring up into the night. The crackle of the wood was like the chirring click of insects. Betancore’s cerise jacket looked like blood in the flame-light.

‘Another hour or two and there’d be no bottles left,’ said Harlon Nayl. He was lying back on an old Selgioni travel rug, his shoulders propped against a boulder.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eisenhorn said to him.

‘I was joking, boss,’ Nayl replied. ‘We brought plenty.’

‘No, I’m sorry...’ said Eisenhorn. ‘You were always so loyal, Harlon, and I got you killed. A crass mistake on my part—’

‘Just circumstances,’ Endor said encouragingly.

‘Listen to me,’ Eisenhorn said to Nayl. ‘I shouldn’t have trusted Jaff. That was a stupid error. But even before that, before the actual *fact* of your death, I placed you in danger so many times. I could have got you killed a thousand times over before I actually did—’

‘Give him a drink, for Throne’s sake!’ Midas called out.

‘He’s maudlin tonight,’ agreed Endor. ‘Very maudlin. Up in his head, all brooding, as usual. I told him to lighten up.’

‘Did that work?’ asked Midas.

‘Does it ever?’ snorted Nayl.

‘Here you go,’ said Kara Swole. She handed Eisenhower a glass of amasec.

‘Kara,’ he said. He was so tired. His resistance was ebbing. They all looked so young.

‘Good to see you again,’ she replied.

He took the glass. The heat of the fire inside him ignited the vapour of the amasec. Tiny blue flames danced across the surface of his drink.

‘Are you dead too?’ Eisenhower asked her.

‘As good as,’ she said. ‘I have walked in your footsteps. Your path only ever leads to one place.’

‘Kara—’

‘I’m joking! Throne! What’s the matter with you tonight?’

‘Some die outright,’ said a figure on the other side of the fire. ‘Some just end up damaged. Their lives ended, to all intents and purposes. It amounts to the same thing.’

Gideon Ravenor gazed through the roaring flames of the campfire at him. He seemed much further away than the rest of them. He was young and handsome, his hair tied back in a long horse tail. He raised his glass.

‘Your health,’ he said, nodding.

Eisenhorn tried to move around the campfire to approach Ravenor. The fire somehow contrived to remain between them, keeping Ravenor on its far side, constantly watching Eisenhower through flames.

‘Most perturbatory,’ said Aemos, at Eisenhower’s side. ‘The way the fire moves like that. As if it is sentient, keeping one thing screened from another.’

He glanced up at Eisenhower and sipped his drink.

‘Wouldn’t you say so, Gregor?’ he asked.

‘Strange indeed,’ said Eisenhower. He looked at the old savant.

‘Do you recall the Torment?’ he asked.

‘Which one?’ asked Aemos. ‘There have been so many.’

‘The Torment, Aemos. Uhlren’s Pox—’

‘Hmmm! Yes. Sequestered ordo dossier 1767563 triple seraph. Docket 991. Entered by Rubricator Edrick Callik on—’

‘Just the details, Aemos.’

‘The first outbreak was recorded on Pirody,’ said Aemos, ‘some thirty-four years before a second pestilence occurred during the third year of the Genovingian Campaign. Ingenious research by the scholars of Materia

Medica revealed the plagues to be related forms of the same pathogen. It was untreatable, and the death toll across many infected worlds was immense. Thanks to the work of a recollector called Lemual Sark, it was eventually identified to be a virus engineered by the Ruinous Powers. Indeed, its efficacy had been enhanced by Subjunctus Valis, an Apothecary of the Doom Eagles Chapter, Adeptus Astartes, who had himself succumbed and was under its malign influence. It would seem, you see, the pox had some self-possession, Gregor. A sentience. Ha ha, like the fire! Is that why you asked?’

‘Just... go on, Aemos,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘The Torment took hold of Valis’ mind, the poor devil,’ said the old man, pondering the facts as he accessed them from his memory. ‘It acted through him, guiding his work so as to protect itself and propagate its curse.’

Aemos looked up at Eisenhorn.

‘Hardly the subject of light conversation at a gathering of friends,’ he smiled.

‘The Torment, Aemos, might it also be an infectious idea? Carried and transmitted by thought as well as body?’

‘Well, I suppose, at a stretch...’ Aemos shrugged.

‘And if it was engineered into an inoculant, Aemos? An antigenic. To transmit the idea alone, without the physical malady? To infect thought, not matter?’

‘Gregor,’ said Aemos, ‘I have no idea who in the Holy Imperium would have the talent or means to perform such a feat. Not even the most gifted magos of Materia Medica.’

‘Unless the Torment itself willed it?’ asked Eisenhorn. ‘Took, let’s say, a gifted magos of Materia Medica, and showed him how the feat could be achieved? Transformed his mind to devise the technique required?’

‘I would think,’ said Aemos, ‘it would need to also transform his mind to make him even want to do it.’

‘A given,’ Eisenhorn agreed. ‘So, in such circumstances, how could a man fight the antigenic? How could he stop it corrupting his system?’

‘I don’t suspect he could,’ said Aemos, ‘if the Torment could overcome the will and physiology of an Adeptus Astartes...’

‘It gets to what is already there,’ said Ravenor, through the flames. ‘It burns through will to whatever lies beneath. The truth, I suppose you’d call

it prosaically. It doesn't turn a man into a heretic. It merely burns back everything to reveal the heretic that's always been there.'

Endor had taken Kara in his arms, and they were laughing and dancing a tight and playful zendov across the old travel rugs spread out around the fire. There was no music. They were dancing in time to the crackle of the flames, the steady chirring beat of invisible insects, the tick of an old clock, the hum of words unsounded. Midas was clapping along. Nayl was opening a bottle. Eisenhower watched as Nayl got up, walked around the campfire and refilled Ravenor's glass. Ravenor looked up at Nayl, smiled. They laughed at some remark.

'Loyalty's a funny thing,' said Nathan Inshabel, perched on a rock nearby. The firelight flickered across his face. He looked at Eisenhower. 'Don't you think so?' he asked.

'I do,' replied Eisenhower.

'It is strong, yet it is fluid,' said Inshabel. 'Strong enough to drag a man to his death, yet fluid enough to flow from one man to another. And it's heritable too. Passed down through the genes, I suppose, like a living idea that will not perish. Thus, it can survive a man's death and pass, say, to his son or daughter, so she might know that loyalty too, and be dragged down in her turn.'

'Not quite like that, papa,' said Thea, sitting on the sand by his feet. 'You can give your life to a cause, an ideal. You serve what you believe in, that's what you taught me.'

'That's what he taught me,' Nathan said, gesturing towards Eisenhower with his glass.

Thea Inshabel looked at Eisenhower with violet eyes. 'But that's true, isn't it, sir?'

'I have always thought so,' said Eisenhower softly.

'I died for you,' said Nathan. 'I became a target because you were a target and, by association, any who stood with you were in the line of fire. In fact, I was bait. All your staff were. Murdered to draw you out. Oh, don't look at me like that. I don't care. I don't blame you. The work we do is not easy. I haven't come here tonight to twist your guilt.'

'Does he have any?' Endor laughed as he whirled past with Kara.

Nathan chuckled. He looked down and rested his hand on his daughter's head.

‘I was so proud when she followed me into the service,’ he said. ‘Proud of a legacy. My child, in sworn service to the ordos. And to serve you, as I did...’

He looked at Eisenhorn.

‘Like father, like daughter,’ he said. ‘She became bait in turn. Gobleka knew what he was doing, didn’t he? He knew how to draw you out. How to play upon what little sentiment you have.’

‘Come off it, Nathan!’ roared Endor, as he and Kara danced past in the other direction. ‘He has none of that either!’

‘Or was it the other way around?’ asked Nathan.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Eisenhorn.

Inshabel shrugged. ‘You sent her after Gobleka. You knew he would find out about her. Find out who she was. The family tie, the legacy link. Father and daughter, sworn allies of the old bastard. He wouldn’t be able to *resist* killing her and using her as bait. Which means he’d show himself. What a cunning way for you to get Goran Gobleka of the Cognitae to give away his location.’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘No, it wasn’t, papa!’ Thea cried.

‘He killed her with an ursid,’ said Nathan, staring straight at Eisenhorn. ‘In a cage. Threw her in alive. Oh, but not before he had tried the antigenic on her, and watched for days as she screamed through the Torment. Another failed test subject. So into the ursid cage with her.’

‘Nathan—’ Eisenhorn began.

‘My child, Gregor, my child. Used as an instrument to advance your obsession. Used and thrown away.’

‘As are we all!’ cried Nayl, toasting. Everyone raised their glasses, and shouted the words.

‘What kind of man uses his friends that way?’ asked Lores Vibben, standing at the edge of the firelight, staring at the flames.

‘No one uses his *friends* that way, Vibben,’ said Midas.

‘You had a daughter too,’ Vibben said to him.

‘I’m sure she’ll be here any moment,’ said Midas. He took a sip of his drink. ‘Won’t she, Gregor? My sweet little Medea. It can’t be much longer before she joins the party too.’

Eisenhorn turned from the firelight. Its raging heat was still inside him. He walked away from the little camp into the vast blue gloom of the desert

night. The moon glared down at him. He heard laughter and voices behind him.

‘Gregor!’ Endor ran to catch up with him. ‘Gregor, where are you going?’

‘I’m not part of that,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Don’t be daft. You’re the reason it’s happening,’ said Endor.

‘This is the Torment,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘This is the deep-stage corruption of the antigenic, breaking down my mind. Delusion. Collapsing memories. Psychic decay. Annihilation of will.’

‘Hey, we all have bad days,’ said Endor. ‘It’s not your fault, just circumstances.’

‘Titus?’

‘Yes, Gregor?’

‘Old Hapshant...’

‘Him? Throne rest his bones,’ said Endor. He took a swig from the bottle of joiliq he was carrying.

‘Why did he choose us?’ Eisenhorn asked. ‘To be his interrogators, all those years ago?’

‘Because we were the very best!’ Endor exclaimed. He raised his arms and did a little capering jig in a circle around Eisenhorn.

‘Seriously, Titus.’

Endor shrugged.

‘He saw something in us,’ he replied.

‘You know how he died,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Throne, *you* know too well how he died. The cerebral worms, they destroyed his mind. His judgement. His cognitive function. The doctors said, after he died, that it was hard to tell how long they had been there. Possibly for years, impairing his critical faculties. He had served for far longer than he was fit. Long past the point when the ordos would have demanded an inquisitor’s retirement.’

‘What are you saying? That we were recruited by a madman?’

‘What if we were?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘I think you’ll find the selection screening for ordo service is a little more rigorous than that,’ said Endor.

‘But he saw something in us,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘In his madness, long before the outward signs were obvious... in that collapsing mind of his.’

‘Yeah? Like what?’

‘The spark of something he’d been hunting all his life. The likeness of the Archenemy he had pursued for so long and so far into madness, he could no longer distinguish between light and dark.’

Endor frowned at him.

‘I’m no heretic, you arse,’ he snapped.

‘No,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘At worst, I think you’re a hedonist who never took anything in his life seriously enough. You liked the power of the rosette, the authority, the opportunities. Then, of course, your own madness came upon you.’

He looked at Endor’s hurt expression. He could still see the worms moving in Endor’s eyes.

‘What does that make you, then?’ asked Endor coldly.

‘I think that’s what I’m being asked to consider,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I thought this was brainwashing, but it’s not. The Torment, the antigenic, it has no agenda. It simply lays a man bare. It reduces him to his base elements so he can see himself. That is how it breaks will.’

‘You’re kind of babbling, you know that?’ said Endor.

‘I am on fire, Titus,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘You can’t see it. Maybe you can with those eyes. I am in agony. I burn to the marrow from head to foot with a blood-froth. It is so intense now, I can scarcely feel it.’

‘Have a drink,’ Endor suggested.

‘No, thank you,’ Eisenhorn replied. ‘Titus, I’ve always hunted for the truth. My whole life. And now I think I may have found it, and it terrifies me. To see what I am. To see what... I may have always been. Gobleka and the Cognitae, all of them, they’re fools. They want to destroy and torture. They want to annihilate. Their motives were simply to hurt me. But there is, I fear, a truth in their philosophy. Gobleka has shown it to me. It’s more than he knew. He dug into me to find something to break me, but he didn’t have the first clue what he was going to find.’

‘What’s that, then?’ asked Endor.

‘A man just like him,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘No, that’s wrong. More than him. Goran Gobleka is a hired killer with aspirations above his abilities. He found someone like the people he serves. Lilean Chase. The King in Yellow.’

He looked at Endor.

‘Could yellow mean flames, do you think?’ he asked. ‘A figure burning from head to foot? On fire entirely? A symbolic name for someone who has

burned through and been transmuted? All that they thought they were, torched away, and only the truth left standing?’

‘Gregor,’ said Endor. ‘I want to say, just me to you, I have no bloody *idea* what you’re on about.’

Eisenhorn looked at him, hopelessly. He tried to put it into words, easy words, but no words would come out. Only strangled un-word noises. Endor looked puzzled for a moment, then his eyes slowly gave way, and small worms started to writhe and slide down his cheeks. He stood where he was, frozen.

The chirring of the insects grew into a roar, a strident loud, slow click beating time to their din, the mechanism of a clock beating out the seconds.

‘It’s almost time,’ said Ravenor.

Eisenhorn looked up. He was standing in shadow. The huge arch of the Spatian Gate was above him. The chirring of the insects was the roar of the crowds lining the eighteen-kilometre route of the Avenue Victor Bellum. Two billion cheering voices. He could hear the marching bands of the procession approaching, the grumble of the war machines, the thump-step of the Titan engines. He could feel the monumental noise vibrating his diaphragm.

This was Thracian, Hive Primaris. The Day of the Great Triumph. Ravenor was dressed in his finest raiment, his Inquisitorial rosette on his breast, just above the small tribe badge of Clan Esw Sweydyr.

The Spatian Gate was made of gleaming white ethercite, and it was so tall the great Titans could march beneath its span. Ravenor looked up at it. He seemed so young and invulnerable.

‘This is it,’ he said, smiling. ‘Just seconds now. The moment of transformation.’

He looked at Eisenhorn.

‘Mine,’ he said, ‘most particularly. But yours too. This moment changes you. You were always driven Gregor, but what happens here today – what happens to me – it propels you on from this point. With a fury, a rage you never lose. It sets you on the path into the dark places, and from here, there is no turning back for you.

‘Even though I try,’ he added. ‘I try my damndest. You know what they will make me do, don’t you?’

‘Hunt for me.’

‘Hunt for you. Hunt you down as a heretic. It will take years, Gregor. It will cost us both. And then, at last, we will stand face-to-face in the King’s City of Dust, and it will end.’

‘How will it end, Gideon?’ Eisenhorn asked.

‘Oh, how do you think?’ replied Ravenor. ‘The pupil always outstrips the master.’

‘You... you see the future then?’

‘Farseeing,’ said Ravenor. ‘My personal heresy. My vice in the eyes of the ordos. That’s the walk into dark places that I’m going to take, because of this. Trapped in that box, struggling to free my mind and see into... into anything. It will damn me, and the ordos will have the leverage they need to make me track you down and finish you.’

‘If you see the future,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Tell me this... Who is the King in Yellow?’

Ravenor smiled.

‘Haven’t you figured that out for yourself yet?’ he asked. ‘He’s been there all the time. Since the earliest days of everything.’

‘I feared he was me,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘What I would become somehow.’

‘Oh, he’s that too,’ said Ravenor. ‘Come on now, you know what you are. Forget the future, Gregor. No man ever really prospered knowing that. The past is much more interesting. Think hard. There are only seconds left. Think hard and see yourself. Consider the possibility that Master Imus was right.’

‘No, he—’

‘Just recognise what you’ve always been,’ said Ravenor. ‘It’ll make it easier for you. No more doubts, no more struggles. Your way will be clear. And it will make it far easier on me too, when the time comes.’

He looked up. They could both hear the screaming note of aircraft engines as they began their low pass along the avenue. Lightnings, twelve of them. There were petals in the air.

‘Here it comes,’ he said. He held out his hand.

Eisenhorn reached out to take it, but his hand met metal. He was looking at the armoured box of Ravenor’s support chair.

‘Transformation,’ the chair’s voxponders crackled. ‘Fire. Rebirth.’

Eisenhorn felt the flash. It was so bright he could see nothing but searing white.

Then the flames came. The flames and the wind and the shock wave. His clothes burned away, blowing like ash from his body. His skin blistered, peeled back and shredded. Muscle and sinew disintegrated. His bones, black with heat, buckled and flew like twigs in the wind.

She was holding his hand.

‘That was all a long time ago,’ she said.

Alizebeth.

The sky was white. Old trees shivered in the cold wind. They swayed, their leaves rustling like the chorus of insects. She led him across the wild fell towards the dark valley below.

‘Do you not suppose,’ she said, ‘it’s ironic? The only woman... the only person... you ever loved was a pariah? Untouchable and cast out, anathema to human contact?’

‘The thought had crossed my mind,’ he said.

‘The fire will end soon,’ she promised.

‘Too late,’ he replied. ‘It has unmade me. I have raked through my own ashes and I understand.’

‘So use that,’ she said. ‘You have never been able to save anyone, not really. Not me, not Gideon, not Midas... not even yourself. You are doomed and always have been, and so are all who know you.’

‘I should have stopped years ago,’ he murmured. ‘The magos was right...’

‘Sark?’ she asked.

‘No, Drusher.’

‘Him, I don’t know,’ she said.

‘He’s no one,’ Eisenhorn said. ‘Just a failed man, clutching at the scraps of life, bemoaning his lot. But he said to me that I had gone on far too long. That I had never worked out when to stop. He was very perceptive. He had given up, you see, far too early and far too easily. But he intuitively saw in me a man who had failed in completely the opposite way. A man who just kept going past any point of reason, his friends begging him to halt, then falling at the wayside as he left them in his wake.’

‘I didn’t think you had any friends?’ she mocked.

‘Not any more,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘So, you see, nothing holds you now,’ she said. ‘You can walk the last few kilometres without any burden. Nothing matters to you any more. Can you use that freedom for me?’

‘To save you?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘Far too late for that,’ she replied. She smiled. ‘But a part of me. I have... I *will* have... It’s hard to explain. A daughter, that’s the easiest word but it’s not accurate. She is of me, but she is also me. And another pariah. You’ve done enough, Gregor. Forget Chase and the King. If you keep going, determined to stop them, you will fail. You will never have the will, despite the uncommon will I *know* you have... You’ll never have the will to finish this alone. So do something simpler, for me. Save her. Save her from the King before the King claims her. Let me have some afterlife in her.’

‘Where is she?’ he asked.

‘She’ll be born two years from now,’ said Bequin. ‘Deep in the Maze, in the shadow of the City of Dust. She will walk the streets of Queen Mab.’

‘On Sancour?’

‘Yes, like the Jaff woman said. That’s where you’ll find her.’

‘Your daughter?’

‘She’s me, Gregor,’ said Alizebeth Bequin. ‘Beta to my alpha. Think of her that way, and find her.’

‘If it’s the last thing I do,’ he said.

‘It will be,’ she replied. ‘Stop hunting the Great Foe. You’ve done enough. You’ve changed the fate of the Imperium in significant ways. End your days with something smaller. One life.’

‘Will the torment end then?’ he asked her. ‘Will the fire go out then?’

‘Between you and me, it will never go out,’ she said. ‘But the pain will cease. Do you remember the Sameter Ninth?’

‘The Guard company?’

‘The veterans, yes. Their emblem was a wheatear. Do you remember how they kept fighting, years after the fight was done? They were loyal to the Throne, Gregor, utterly loyal, but their war had traumatised them so, they saw enemies everywhere. They fought against the notion of the dark, against every shadow, beyond all bounds of sense or reason.’

‘I remember,’ he said. ‘One of the saddest things I ever witnessed. One of the hardest tasks of my life. To stop men and women from being loyal.’

‘Imagine how I feel,’ she said.

‘You mean me?’ he asked.

‘I do,’ she said. Her smile was everything he remembered.

‘There,’ she said, ‘that’s the only time I’ll ever get to say those words to you.’

‘I do too,’ he whispered.

‘You’ve done enough big things in your life,’ she said. She faced him and brushed the soot and grit from his old coat. ‘Forget them. Do a small thing.’

‘Don’t go,’ he said.

‘I’m not the one going,’ she said. ‘This is where I stop. You go on. You always have. One last walk.’

‘I have to finish this first,’ he said. ‘Sark. Gobleka. Keshtre.’

‘You don’t,’ she replied.

‘To reach Sancour, I must be alive,’ he said. ‘To find this girl, this daughter of yours. I need to end Keshtre and get out so I can make my way to Sancour.’

‘You don’t,’ she repeated.

The rustle of the leaves had become the stirring of insects, and the stirring of insects had become a fizzling noise. The chuckle of an electrocorporeal storm. He hadn’t heard its eerie sound since Ignix, long ago.

‘The Cackle,’ he said.

‘You know what that means,’ she said.

The regia occulta had opened before them. Lightning writhed and fluoresced around its mouth. Corposant crackled. The wind rose.

Eisenhorn couldn’t look at it. He glanced around.

‘I know this place,’ he said.

‘Of course you do,’ she said. ‘I’ve never been here myself, but you have. The high fells above Antieth. DeKere’s world. You used to tell me about it.’

‘Where I was born,’ he said.

‘Exactly,’ she said. ‘Where you were born the first time. It felt like the right place to bring you so you could be born all over again.’

She raised her hand to his chin, and he flinched, afraid he would burn her. But she was simply, gently, turning his head, making him look at the gleaming, spitting gateway of the regia occulta.

‘This can take you there,’ she said. ‘One step. Forget the rest, forget it all. Go on now. Before it closes again.’

She kissed him on the cheek.

‘Take the pathway,’ she said. ‘It is straight and true, and the only one you need.’

He turned, but she was gone.

He stepped into the light.

It twists around him and carries him forward. The world falls away, then stars begin to tumble past him like snow. Faster. A blizzard of stars covering the world, raising deep and silent drifts of stellar motes. A heartbeat. A long winter. Centuries snap and pile into one another, like the cars of a runaway train that has left the rails. He sees the Karanines in early summer, the banners flying from the new guardian fortresses. There are armies on the pass, advancing after the spring thaw, bodies released from the lock of winter to move again. The Udaric hordes, clad in leather and bronze, carrying the skulls of cave ursids on their tribal standards, and bearing too their dreams of finding Vaartuk and deliverance. Their chieftain rides at their head, his warhelm crested with the feathers of a sea raptor. In the woods below, the fortress garrisons muster, sounding the call on brass trumpets that loop around their bodies in a circle. The Karanine Guard, forming tight ranks and shield walls in the mouth of the pass, ready to deploy steel blades and precision discipline against the barbarian invaders, and defend their dreams of stable colonisation.

Iron discipline against feral chaos.

Trumpets calling in the woods. Rams horns blaring from the pass.

Redbeaks still trilling in the trees, oblivious, all those years ago.

An old man beside a pool, sketching.

The low summer sun. An eagle flying. A quiver of extimate spaces overlapping.

A room. A hundred thousand rooms. The people in them. Someone crying. A flame-yellow moon. A bonfire. A Selgioni rug. Laughter.

A sea that was not a sea. An immaterial ocean, waves rising higher than all the worlds of ever. Glimpsed behemoths sounding deep beneath the raging surface. Laughter, again. Perpetual laughter. A cackle. Whispers. Words that make. Words that build and un-build. An Old Night, its endless dark filled with insects in their trillions. Chirring words that predate the mouths that spoke them. Words that predate all organic mouths. Words etched on white stone.

An eye that is not an eye. An eye wounded by worms. A wound in space that is not an eye. An influx. An outpouring. A lie. A truth. A father and his eighteen sons. A transgression. A father and his daughter. A dead girl.

Another not yet born. Years crumple like paper, overlapped like shuffled cards, out of order.

A golden throne. A figure on it, too bright to see, too dark to name. A figure in a box. A box that is a golden throne. A golden throne that is just a box. A man that is no longer a man. Something once human kept alive by the throne that surrounds him, seeing all, knowing all, reading the future and trying to forget the past. A mind isolated. A dark place. An old pict, the image of a son who was everything and nothing, and no way of knowing if the image was made before or after, because he looked the same before and after, and because time was crumpling like paper, and perhaps the *before* had been the *after* all along.

A wheatear. A birthplace.

Something untouchable. Someone too afraid to ever touch.

A man limping away into blackness, utterly alone, his back turned, carrying on, step after step, for a reason he can no longer remember.

A fire.

An ancient city on the edge of a desert. Everything golden with the haze of dust. A shadow city beyond it, a twin. One place that was two, two that were one. An extimate metropolis.

A city of learning. A city of knowledge. A place of Cognitae.

A City of Dust.

Another king. Another throne. All in yellow. Fire and dust.

Eight waiting. Eight points. Eight shots.

Blood. Inheritance.

The King beckons. Cyclopean daemons, too vast to comprehend, kneel at his throne in chains and fealty, whispering un-words.

Chirring like insects.

Like ticking clocks.

Like cackling light.

Like crackling fire.

‘You’re here now.’

A voice.

‘Isn’t this where you want to be? Where you’ve been walking to your entire life? This *is* what you wanted, isn’t it?’

Eisenhorn opened his eyes. Dust fogged his vision. His mouth was full of sand.

He was face down.

He hauled himself up, spitting and coughing, trying to clear the dust from his throat. The light around him was golden and fogged with powder. A haze.

‘The city’s right here,’ said the voice. ‘You’re at the gates.’

‘W-which city?’ Eisenhorn could barely speak.

‘The City of Dust,’ said the voice. ‘That’s right, isn’t it?’

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m right here too,’ said the voice.

Eisenhorn looked up. The figure looked down at him.

‘Hello, little thing,’ said Cherubael.

‘Why are you here?’ asked Eisenhorn. ‘How—’

‘You called me,’ said Cherubael. ‘I came because you called me.’

Eisenhorn tried to stand. The daemonhost reached down to help him.

‘Don’t touch me!’

Cherubael looked hurt.

‘But... you called me,’ he said. ‘To help you. That’s what you always do. That’s why you made me. In the end, you see, I’m the only friend you’ve got. Which says a lot, I think you’ll agree.’

‘I didn’t call you,’ said Eisenhorn. He got to his feet. He looked at the city shimmering in the distance beyond the veil of golden dust.

‘Oh, but you see, you did,’ said Cherubael. The daemonhost hovered in front of Eisenhorn, his broken chain dragging in the dust. ‘From the hidden way.’

‘The regia occulta?’

‘*That’s* the thing,’ said Cherubael. ‘I knew there was a proper name for it. The re-gi-a o-ccul-ta. You called to me as you walked along it.’

‘And you came?’

‘It’s what a friend does,’ grinned Cherubael.

Eisenhorn shook his head. The fire had gone out. The pain had gone. *All* the pain had gone, in fact.

‘I can’t have,’ he began. ‘I don’t control you like that. I have *never* been able to. It takes months to bring you out, constant effort to bind you and keep you contained. The very limit of my mind and my will just to get you to stay calm. I didn’t call you. And even if I did, in my madness, I couldn’t keep you tame.’

‘You can now, Gregor,’ said Cherubael.

‘No.’

‘Indeed, yes,’ Cherubael laughed. ‘I like it, actually. The fight is gone. The constant struggle, me and you, all that pain and heartache. Blanked out. You call me and I come. That’s how it works now. I cannot even *begin* to resist you. I prefer it this way.’

‘This is an illusion,’ Eisenhorn said to himself. ‘It’s just... another stage of the Torment. Another mind-trick...’

Cherubael glanced around. His chain rattled.

‘Who are you talking to?’ he asked.

Eisenhorn looked at him.

‘This isn’t real,’ he said to the daemonhost. ‘You’re not here. I’m not here. I didn’t call you, and I know for damn sure I couldn’t control you. My psykana’s burned out. I must be close to death. The end-stage delusions of the Torment.’

‘No, you’re not dead,’ said Cherubael. ‘Not dying. Not hallucinating. You’ve simply arrived. This is the place you were always going to, and you’ve got here. I’m impressed. Honestly. I don’t say that to people very often.’

‘The place?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘Physically,’ said Cherubael, ‘*and* metaphysically. I suppose you get to decide which matters more. The physical place is the City of Dust, inside the City of Queen Mab, on Sancour, in the Angelus Subsector. The year is 500. Give or take a year. *Metaphysically*, well... that’s up to you.’

‘Sancour?’

‘Yes, yes. Absolutely dreadful place, between you and me, but not my choice. You call the shots, now. You did... you did *want* to be here, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I... I don’t know.’

‘It’s where she asked you to go,’ said Cherubael. ‘That untouchable of yours, you know, whatsername...’

‘Alizebeth.’

‘Yes, A-liz-e-beth. She asked you nicely.’

‘It was just the Torment in her form.’

‘She asked you nicely anyway. She asked you a favour. A last favour. Save her daughter. I suppose that’s what you’re going to do. You’d do anything for her.’

The daemonhost saw Eisenhorn looking at the spectral city.

‘Or have you changed your mind, Gregor?’ he asked. ‘Are you still tempted? One final push to bring the Archenemy down?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know if any of it was true.’

‘Seems to me you have a choice. Do the right thing, or do the right thing. I know that doesn’t sound like a choice. You know what I mean. Do the big thing that matters, or the small thing that counts.’

‘Can’t I do both?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘I don’t know?’ asked Cherubael. ‘Can you?’

Eisenhorn didn’t reply.

‘I suppose,’ said Cherubael, ‘it comes down to what matters most. To you. Obligation to... you know... I don’t like to say His name. Let’s call Him the Rot-God-King. Or obligation to those who counted on you. Personally, I mean. Let’s call them... and here’s another word I don’t like to use... friends.’

‘I don’t have any friends,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘No, you don’t, and I’ve always liked that about you,’ said Cherubael. ‘But... How can I put it? Friends have *you*. People have befriended you, to their cost. They have stuck to you. They have stayed with you. They have been loyal through everything. You’ve just never really been loyal back. Which is odd, because loyalty is your big thing.’

‘The two things have always conflicted,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘But?’

‘I want to do the right thing,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I have always wanted to do the right thing. I’m damned because of it.’

‘So?’

‘I choose both. And choosing both means I don’t start here.’

Cherubael sighed.

‘We’re not staying then?’ he asked.

‘I’m not. I have something to finish. I have to... retrace my steps.’

‘Have I got to carry you?’

‘I don’t think you do.’

‘Well,’ said Cherubael. ‘I’ll be waiting for you then.’

‘You will?’

‘Like a good boy. That’s what you want. So that’s what I’ll do. I’ll wait right here until you get back. See you in... oh... about twenty years.’

Eisenhorn looked at the daemonhost and shook his head.

‘Off you go,’ said Cherubael. He gave a little wave. ‘Good luck and all that. That is what friends say, isn’t it?’

‘Why...’ said Eisenhower. ‘Why are you being so nice to me?’

‘Well, because, quite frankly,’ said Cherubael, ‘and please don’t tell anyone, but right now you scare the absolute shit out of me.’

Eisenhower smiled.

‘Hang on,’ said Cherubael. ‘I didn’t think you could do that any more.’

‘Neither did I,’ said Eisenhower.

He raised his hand.

The fire leapt up.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Whatever Day Yesterday Was

Davinich clutched Gobleka's shoulder for support.

'You get him?' he asked through swollen lips.

'I got him,' said Gobleka.

They stared down at Eisenhower's body. It was crumpled against the handrail, propped up in a half-sprawled, half-kneeling position. His eyes were closed, and the empty injector was slipping from his limp fingers.

'Nothing's happening,' said Davinich.

'I thought I heard him scream,' said Gobleka.

'Yeah, me too,' said Davinich. 'It came from his mind, not his mouth. Goran, why isn't he—'

'Just wait,' said Gobleka.

'For what?' asked Davinich. They looked at each other. They both knew the symptomatic progression. They'd documented it in enough test subjects. After the antigenic was administered, a subject lapsed into violent, thrashing seizures that could last hours or days. The skin blistered and peeled. Sometimes it fell off completely. Even for them, it was hard to watch.

After the frenzied agony, every test subject had become still, a few moments of calm that preceded death. None had survived except Sark, and Sark's first exposure had resulted in a six-hour ordeal of fits, screaming and haemorrhaging.

But Eisenhower had just become comatose. Twenty-five seconds had passed since Gobleka had stabbed the injector into his neck, and he was silent and still.

'It didn't work,' Davinich said. 'I think we killed him.'

Gobleka crouched down and put his ear close to Eisenhower's mouth.

‘He’s still breathing,’ he said.

Davinch shook his head.

‘Not for long,’ he said. ‘You hit him with a full dose. He was already weak—’

‘Strong up here,’ said Gobleka, tapping his temple with his index finger.

Davinch continued to look dubious.

‘Well, I think that’s the problem,’ he said. He walked over to the med kit and started to sponge the blood off his face with a sterile dressing. Each wipe made him grimace. ‘That’s the thing they always said about him. Iron will. He probably tried to fight back. Resist, you know. You don’t resist the antigen. Resisting makes it worse. You’ve fried him. Brain-dead. That’s probably just an autonomic response you’re seeing. His body spinning down.’

Davinch suddenly recoiled and cried out in alarm.

Eisenhorn had lurched forwards without warning. He was on his hands and knees, his eyes closed, sweat dripping from his face. He was trying to rise, but the cuffs around his wrists were hindering him.

‘Get him up,’ Gobleka ordered.

They battled to raise Eisenhorn to his feet. As Davinch held him upright, Gobleka slapped Eisenhorn around the face a couple of times.

‘Wake up! Can you hear me?’

Eisenhorn’s eyelids fluttered.

‘Eisenhorn?’ whispered Gobleka. He dragged Eisenhorn’s right eyelid up with his thumb, expecting to see a blood-blown iris, or worse.

‘Great spirits of the dark...’ he whispered in wonder. He started to laugh.

‘What?’ asked Davinch. ‘What is it? Gobleka, what?’

Gobleka turned Eisenhorn’s face so Davinch could see.

‘Damn,’ Davinch said.

Eisenhorn’s eyes were shining with violet light.

‘Voriet needs to rest,’ said Drusher.

‘No time,’ replied Nayl.

‘He needs to rest,’ Drusher insisted.

‘I know he does, magos,’ said Nayl. ‘But there is no time for that.’

Macks leaned over the rail and looked down.

‘That fire’s bad,’ she said. The air around them was already hazed with smoke. It was dirty and black, and making them cough. Far below, the sump

was a blazing sea of flames, a furious petrochemical fire that was beginning to choke the tower with murky, toxic smog.

‘On the plus side,’ she said, ‘I guess it will take out the Loom.’

‘There’s that,’ said Nayl. ‘But we have to find an exit. Another ten minutes, and it won’t be possible to breathe in here. Besides, that fire’s going to climb.’

‘I can go on,’ said Voriet. Drusher could tell he was lying. Every time Voriet coughed because of the rising smoke, it aggravated the pain of his broken bones. He looked dead on his feet.

Nayl put his arm around Voriet to support him and began to climb the next staircase. Macks and Drusher looked at each other then followed. They could feel the intense heat from below. They followed the stairs up to another inspection catwalk, traced that to its end and took the next set of metal steps up. The Loom’s whirring mechanisms were wafting strange circles and hoops in the slow smoke, like ripples in water.

‘Do you think he’s dead?’ Macks asked Drusher.

‘Eisenhorn?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You heard that scream,’ said Drusher.

‘I felt it,’ she replied. ‘I don’t want to think what they might have done to him to make him scream like that.’

Nayl paused to look up. The eerie light was still glowing above them, but the smoke in the air had made it foggy.

‘Just a few more levels,’ Nayl said. ‘At the main gantry, there was an exit into the rest of the fortress. That’s how me and the magos got in. I think that’s the only way out. Can you do that, Darra?’

Voriet nodded. His face was pinched and pale, and beaded with dirty perspiration. His clothes were sticking to him.

‘Let’s go then,’ said Nayl.

Voriet reached out with his good hand and caught Nayl’s arm. Nayl stopped.

‘Back up,’ he hissed to the others.

There was an animation on the platform ahead of them, a skeleton that had been bleached white. Odd symbols had been scratched into its bones. It limped towards them, fixing them with the tiny green pinpricks of light that served as its eyes.

They moved back along the platform, hustling Voriet along, and found a short flight of steps down onto an access catwalk. It felt wholly wrong to be going down rather than up.

‘More steps ahead,’ said Nayl. ‘A different way up.’

They approached the steps. These rose from a junction platform between catwalk spans. The steps ran up between two huge whizzing flywheels to another platform gantry that they could barely see in the smoke.

Drusher spotted movement beyond the steps. Two more animations. One was a hunched, decayed thing. The other was Deputy Cronyl. They were closing in.

‘Just get to the steps and get up,’ said Nayl.

The four began to ascend as fast as they could. Drusher didn’t want to look back. Cronyl had been moving quite fast, at a brisk stride.

Voriet slipped. They caught him, and Macks and Nayl began to carry him between them.

‘Move, move!’ Drusher urged. He glanced behind him. Cronyl was on the steps, the other two animations not far behind him.

‘Leave me,’ gasped Voriet.

‘Shut the hell up,’ Macks told him.

They reached the upper platform. It was a broad area of deck, with two exits, one at each end, both staircases leading up.

An animation was coming towards them from the right-hand flight of stairs. It was the Cognitae agent Blayg. The top of his head was missing, and his portly face was drenched in dried blood. A combat assault rifle was hanging around his shoulders on a sling, bobbing against him as he walked. It was just dead weight he was dragging along with him.

‘Other way,’ said Nayl. They turned.

Audla Jaff was coming towards them from the other flight of steps. The psykana shock wave that had destroyed her seemed to have broken everything inside her. She moved like a damp sheet hung from a wire, loose and heavy, one shoulder drooping, her head tilted askew. Her clothes were soaked in blood.

There was no way past either of them. Cronyl and the other two animations were almost at the top of the stairs behind them.

They were cornered, all exits blocked. Drusher wondered if he should stand his ground and wait for the hands of the animations to reach him, or admit defeat and take a running jump off the platform. He tried to decide

which would be a worse way to die: the eradicating horror of the animations' touch, or a long, conscious plunge into a lake of flame.

He put himself in front of Macks.

Nayl knew it was useless, but he pulled out his Tronsvasse. He fired multiple times at Blayg. Fizzling green light ate his shots. One round cut the sling of the autorifle, and it clattered onto the deck. Blayg stepped over it. Nayl turned and shot at Jaff.

The electric aura around her turned his shots to vapour.

The animations raised their hands.

'What do we do?' asked Davinch.

Gobleka was gazing at Eisenhorn. Eisenhorn simply stood there, staring ahead at nothing with his shining eyes.

'Let's get him into the palace,' he said. 'Run some tests, perception exams, psychometrics, you know.'

Davinch grinned at him.

'Chase will adore you for this,' he said. 'This changes everything. With two successful subjects, we can keep the Loom operating full-time. No more shutdowns to let Sark rest.'

Gobleka nodded.

'We'll need to prepare a message,' he said. 'We're going to need more staff here to manage the operation. Maybe Chase herself will come.'

'You can tell her how you turned him,' said Davinch.

'Actually,' said Gobleka. 'I don't think I had to turn him at all. Just give him a little push. I think this is where he was going all along. He just needed to tip over. That's why there was no fight, no convulsions. He was basically already there.'

'Gods below,' said Davinch in awe. 'To think... to think this man was ordo. That they used him and trusted him. Gave him authority. Damn, Goran, I thought their selection programme was rigorous and—'

'I think that proves the King is winning,' said Gobleka. 'The warp's everywhere, in everything. Even in the very heart of the Holy Inquisition, the very bastards who are supposed to be bulwarks of the fight against it. We're close, Davinch. Months, maybe a year or two. So close. I knew the Rot-God's kingdom was shaky, but it's already disintegrating. It's not even going to be a struggle to topple it. It's rotten to the core. One touch from us and it'll all come crashing down.'

He started to laugh again, but it trailed off. He frowned and sniffed the air.

‘Do you smell that?’

‘No,’ replied Davinch.

‘Smoke,’ said Gobleka. ‘Something’s on fire.’

‘I don’t smell it,’ said Davinch. He had gone back to cleaning and patching his face with the contents of the med kit.

‘Of course you don’t,’ snapped Gobleka, ‘your nose is mashed across your dumb face.’

He went to the top of the steps and looked over the rail.

‘I can see light down there. Way down.’ He glanced at Davinch. ‘Shit,’ he said. ‘I think the sump’s on fire. The sump well.’

Davinch lowered the crumpled, bloody dressing in his hand.

‘Are you serious?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I’m frigging serious!’

‘What do we do?’ asked Davinch.

‘Put it out. Fast.’

‘But how? We don’t have any—’

Gobleka looked up towards the main gantry.

‘Sark’ll have to do it. Trap it. Snuff it.’

‘He’s been running on full for a while,’ said Davinch anxiously. ‘What if he isn’t strong enough? I mean, what if he’s about to crash? He needs so long to recuperate—’

‘Help me with Eisenhorn,’ said Gobleka.

‘What?’

‘Just do it, Davinch!’ Gobleka fixed him with a savage look. ‘Do you want to tell the King how we let the Loom burn?’ he asked.

Davinch shook his head.

‘Then help me get this frigger up there,’ said Gobleka. He paused. ‘Wait... Show me his gun.’

‘What?’

‘You said you took his piece. Show it to me.’

Davinch pulled Eisenhorn’s Scipio from the pocket of his jacket and handed it to Gobleka.

Gobleka popped out the clip and examined the uppermost round.

‘Enuncia,’ he said. ‘Look, he’s marked the rounds with Enuncia.’

He pushed several bullets out into his palm and showed one to Davinch.

Davinich swallowed hard.

‘Is that what it looks like?’ he asked.

‘You said this was his back-up piece?’ asked Gobleka, reloading the clip. ‘Right. For special targets. I think these custom loads were the trick you reckoned he was hoping to pull.’

‘So what?’ asked Davinich.

Gobleka slid the clip back into the Scipio’s grip.

‘If we’re going to put the old bastard in the cage, we’re going to have to take Sark out,’ he said. ‘I want to make sure we’re covered.’

‘Against what?’ asked Davinich.

‘I don’t trust Sark,’ said Gobleka. ‘I don’t think he really is Sark any more. I don’t know exactly what we’re going to be letting out of that cage.’

They took Eisenhower by the shoulders and began to escort him up to the gantry. He was slow and unresponsive, like a sleepwalker.

‘This is a bad idea,’ Davinich murmured.

‘Then have a better one,’ Gobleka snarled. Gobleka had been trained to improvise, even in the deepest crisis, and he wasn’t about to let any possibility go.

They struggled with Eisenhower up the steps onto the main gantry. In the cage, the magos was sitting cross-legged like an ancient shaman, radiating light and muttering un-words. Gobleka and Davinich could see at once that Sark was close to the end of his strength. The glow coming from him was beginning to falter, like a dodgy filament. Plasmic residue was slick on his skin, oozing like glue. He was starting to blister.

‘Hold him,’ Gobleka ordered. He left Davinich watching the silent, lobotomised Eisenhower and walked over to the cage.

‘Magos? Magos Sark?’ he called out.

The glow flickered.

‘I... I want to stop, Goran,’ Sark murmured. ‘Can I stop now?’

‘There’s a fire, magos.’

‘It’s in me, Goran.’

‘No, sir. A fire. Down below. The sump. Can you snuff it out?’

Sark opened his eyes and looked at Gobleka. Beads of blood trickled from his tear ducts.

‘I’m so tired,’ he mumbled.

‘All right,’ said Gobleka. ‘Magos? Magos, listen to me. You stop now. I promised you, didn’t I? It’s time to rest. We have another subject.’

‘You do? I can rest? Really?’

‘Just like I promised, magos.’

‘It worked again?’ asked Sark. ‘You got it to work again?’

‘We did.’

‘Who?’ asked Sark. Gobleka gestured at the figures waiting behind him. Sark peered through the bars, trying to focus his eyes.

‘Eisenhorn?’ he asked. ‘You made it work with him?’

Gobleka nodded.

‘Let’s get you out of there,’ he said.

‘Oh please,’ said Sark. ‘I want to get out. I want to get out.’

Gobleka crouched in front of the cage door. He put his hand on the grip of the Scipio tucked in his waistband.

‘Power down, magos,’ he said. ‘Just bring the Loom back to idling. I’ll get you out, and you can rest.’

Sark nodded. He muttered something that wasn’t words. The light radiating from him diminished, as if it were sucking back into him, light running the wrong way and draining into nothing. The great gears and wheels of the Loom began to chug and clatter as they decelerated. The industrial roar faded back to a hum.

Panting, Sark looked out at Gobleka.

‘Let me out, please, Goran,’ he said. ‘I so long to be let out. This cage is crushing me.’

Gobleka said an un-word Chase had taught him. The cage door clicked unsealed. Gobleka swung it open.

Sark began to crawl out. He clearly needed help, but Gobleka didn’t want to touch him. He wanted to watch him closely and draw Eisenhorn’s gun fast if he had to. Outside the bounds of the psychometric cage, anything was possible. Anything could be coming out. Anything could be crawling free.

Sark pawed his way out onto the deck and flopped on his side like an exhausted dog, the plasmic residue dripping off him and pooling around him. Some of it was drying to a crust on his shrivelled skin.

Slowly, he began to rise.

‘H-help me,’ he called out.

‘You can do it,’ Gobleka replied, his hand still resting on the pistol.

Sark stood up. He raised his head and looked at the light of the lamps in the rigs around the gantry.

‘How long?’ he asked, his voice thin and frail. ‘How long have I been in there?’

‘A long time,’ said Gobleka.

‘A week?’

‘Longer.’

‘How long, Goran?’

‘Seventeen years, I think,’ said Gobleka.

Sark didn’t reply. He looked down at himself, at the wreck of his body.

‘I won’t go back in,’ he said at last. ‘I have earned my reward. I have earned my place at the King’s right hand. I have served. You will not force me back in there again.’

Gobleka saw that Davinch was looking at him, anxious. Gobleka shook his head quietly. They’d deal with Sark in due course. If they could keep him contained and happy, they’d find a way to get him back in when it was time for another weaving.

‘I’m going to rest, now,’ Sark said. ‘Make arrangements, Goran. I want passage to Sancour by the end of the week. A fast ship, a crew that can be trusted. I will make my report to the King personally.’

‘I’m going to need to run some tests on you,’ said Gobleka.

Sark looked at him sharply. A ripple of violet light flickered in his eyes.

‘Just to make sure you’re fit to travel,’ said Gobleka.

‘And to obtain more data, magos,’ said Davinch. ‘To assist in the preparation of further successful candidates.’

Sark nodded. He walked over to Davinch and faced Eisenhorn.

‘You have had some success at least,’ said Sark. ‘A replication to build on.’

He looked more closely into Eisenhorn’s blank face.

‘I pity you,’ Sark said. ‘I hate all you stand for and all the setbacks you have caused the Cognitae over the years, but even so, I pity you for what you are about to endure.’

Eisenhorn didn’t reply.

Sark turned and limped up the steps towards the hatch into the palace.

‘Should we follow?’ Davinch whispered to Gobleka.

‘I don’t want to leave him alone for long,’ Gobleka replied. ‘He seems safe, but I really don’t know what he is any more. First, let’s deal with this.’

He looked at Eisenhorn.

‘Let’s get him in the cage,’ he said.

Nayl took a step towards Blayg.

‘Get ready to move,’ he told the others. ‘I’m going to knock him down. Get ready to run when I do.’

Drusher could see that Nayl meant to tackle the animation and grapple it out of their way.

‘You’ll die!’ he exclaimed.

‘We’re dying right now,’ replied Nayl.

There was a chattering, rattling thump, and the light above them dimmed considerably. The gears and mechanisms of the Loom suddenly spun down and slowed.

The animations collapsed to the deck as though the invisible wires that had been supporting them had suddenly snapped. They heard the separating bones of the skeletal one clattering and bouncing away down the steps.

‘What does that mean?’ asked Macks.

‘Don’t question it, Germaine,’ said Drusher. ‘Move, before they get up again.’

They hurried Voriet past Blayg’s body, towards the steps he had approached from. Nayl paused, squatted and picked up Blayg’s autorifle. Gingerly, he poked at Blayg with the weapon’s stock. No electric crackle. He reached on and took some spare clips from the corpse’s pockets.

‘Hurry up!’ said Drusher.

‘I’m coming,’ Nayl growled. Hefting the combat weapon, he turned and ran after them.

Gobleka shut the cage door with the locking un-word. Smoke threaded the air, hanging like gauze under the lighting rigs.

Inside the cage, Eisenhower was on his knees, staring dumbly at his cuffed hands. He slowly raised his head and looked at Gobleka.

‘You know what to do,’ said Gobleka.

Eisenhower didn’t reply.

‘I know this is all unfamiliar,’ said Gobleka. He crouched down to peer through the bars. ‘You’re not used to your mind working this way. Don’t fear it. It’s just revelation. True understanding is always terrifying. You’re seeing the way things are. You’ve come home to the place that created us all. It’s been calling to you since before you were born, and you’ve been too scared... too indoctrinated by lies... to answer. You can now. It’s very freeing.’

‘The warp...’ Eisenhower whispered.

‘That’s right,’ Gobleka smiled. ‘You don’t need to know anything any more. The warp is in you, and it will show you everything. How to live. How to think. How to master this world, and every world. It’ll show you how to work the Loom. It will teach you the language you need. The words that you must speak. Just open your mind and they’ll flow to you.’

Eisenhorn’s lips began to move. No sounds came out. He looked like a child learning to read.

‘Make the Loom turn,’ said Gobleka. ‘Make it spin. I need you to harness its power and extinguish the fire. We must make the Loom safe. That’s our first priority. Secure Keshtre, and save the Loom. Let the words come. It’ll be an easy task for a man like you.’

Eisenhorn’s lips were moving faster. He was starting to murmur. Gobleka heard the first syllables sounding, and it felt like a jolt in his sternum. More, fully formed un-words began to flow from Eisenhorn’s mouth.

Davinch had already backed away to the edge of the gantry and was looking on with great concern. He’d scooped up Gobleka’s suppressed autorifle, and was clutching it tightly. Gobleka rose and retreated too. Eisenhorn was speaking quite clearly now. The un-words were coming out of him fast and precise. Each one stung at Gobleka’s flesh.

He’d never heard the litany of Enuncia vocalised so clearly. The magos had mastered it and harnessed its power, but it had always appeared a struggle for him, a constant effort to maintain mastery. Sark had often stumbled or muttered, his weavings interrupted by inarticulate screams or yelps. Eisenhorn was confident and unhalting. He was almost instantly fluent.

In the cage, Eisenhorn closed his eyes and tilted back his head.

Crusts of rime crackled as they formed around the bars of the psychometric cage. Snakes of green electrical discharge danced around the metal grille of the gantry deck around its base, leaping up to bite at the bars or coil around them like climbing tracedy. One struck upwards and hit a lighting rig, blowing out a set of lamps in a loud burst of sparks.

‘Look at him,’ breathed Davinch over the sound of the un-words and the fizzle of the discharge.

‘Almost immediate command,’ replied Gobleka. ‘Gods, that speaks to considerable preconditioning. Just as I suspected, he wasn’t just suitable, he was ripe. He’s been one of us for a very long time. A heretic long before the ordos declared him such.’

The agony hit Eisenhorn. He shook, and his body stiffened into a savage rictus, his back arched, his wrists pulling uselessly at the chain of the cuffs.

He did not stop speaking.

Something lit inside him. A harsh radiance began to swell, spearing out from his core. Within seconds, he was shining like a lamp, a figure made of light not flesh, his old black clothes a vague silhouette in the glare.

There was a thump and a series of rattling clanks. A chattering sound, a chirring, a cackling, ticking hum. The gears of the Loom around them began to turn. The cogs began to spin.

The Loom roared back to life.

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TWENTY-FIVE

Chaopterae Metalepta

They had stopped to let Voriet rest again when the Great Machine resumed function. The sudden clattering roar and movement made them all flinch.

‘If this has restarted...’ Voriet began.

‘...the animations might restart too,’ finished Drusher.

Nayl nodded. He checked the autorifle he’d taken from Blayg’s corpse and took out his Tronsvasse.

‘Which do you want?’ he asked Macks.

‘You got clips for both?’ she replied.

He nodded.

Macks pointed to the combat rifle, and Nayl handed it over.

‘Don’t I get a gun?’ asked Drusher.

Nayl and Macks looked at him.

‘We’ve only got two,’ said Nayl.

‘It was sort of a joke,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m tired.’

‘We’re all tired,’ Nayl agreed. ‘One last push. One last ascent. I think we can make it up to the gantry and get to the tower exit. Just a bit of a climb left.’

He looked at Voriet. The interrogator, deathly pale, nodded affirmatively.

‘We may have to fight our way past the Cognitae,’ said Nayl.

Macks was putting the last of the spare clips in her jacket pockets.

‘I don’t have any problems with that,’ she said.

‘Or rescue Eisenhorn,’ said Drusher.

‘If he’s alive,’ said Macks. Drusher could hear the doubt in her voice.

‘Well, let’s do it like we mean it,’ said Nayl.

‘That’s odd,’ said Drusher. They looked at him.

He was peering at an insect that was crawling along the platform's metal handrail. It was small, less than two centimetres long, a locustform specimen.

'I haven't seen any insects in here,' said Drusher.

'So?' asked Macks.

'I'm just saying,' said Drusher. He picked the insect up and let it scurry over his hands, examining it.

'*Chaopterae metalepta*,' he said. 'Short horned plains-hopper. Family *Acrididae*. Not native.'

'To where?' asked Macks sourly.

'To Gershom,' said Drusher. 'And from what I saw out of the window, not here either.'

'What window?' asked Voriet, slowly getting to his feet.

'Just a window,' replied Drusher.

'What did you see?' asked Macks.

'Doesn't matter,' said Drusher. He picked up the insect by its wing cases and held it up. Its legs writhed. 'How is this here? See the red banding on the thorax? That's swarm-phase colouring. These things live in huge colonies. When overcrowding becomes an issue, it stimulates the release of serotonin, and the insects shift from statary to migratory morphs. They change colour, and then they begin an upsurge.'

'So?' asked Macks again.

'Well, you wouldn't see just one coloured like this,' said Drusher. 'By definition, an upsurge morph is never seen alone.'

Macks stared at him levelly.

'I'm very glad you find the insect fascinating,' she said. 'Can we get on now?'

'Yes, of course,' he said. He shook the insect off his hand, and it fluttered away. They started up the next flight of stairs, Nayl leading, then Macks, then Drusher helping Voriet.

'There's another one,' said Voriet. Another locustform had settled on the steps.

'Why don't we turn this into a nature ramble?' Macks hissed back at them.

'There's quite a few of them, actually,' said Drusher. Two more insects fluttered past. Several more were crawling on the steps and the rail.

'Where are they coming from?' asked Macks.

‘Uhm, my original point,’ said Drusher.

More insects began to billow around them.

‘Ugh,’ said Macks, brushing one away, ‘*they are* swarming.’

Drusher peered over the rail. By the light of the sump fire far below, he could see thousands of tiny motes swirling in the spaces between the gears of the Loom. Hundreds of thousands.

‘Yes, they are,’ he said. ‘A major upsurge outbreak.’

‘Could it be the heat?’ asked Nayl. ‘The heat of the fire?’

‘Oh, Throne!’ exclaimed Macks. ‘Yes, let’s all stop and study nature!’

An insect landed on Nayl’s cheek. He flicked it away.

‘She’s right,’ he said. ‘Keep moving.’

They made their way up three more platform sections. From a curved catwalk, they could clearly see the main gantry above them, bathed in noxious light. The air was full of churning insect clouds. The locustforms were settling everywhere: on the catwalk deck, on the rail, on their clothes. The chirring drone of their stridulation was as loud as the din of the furious Loom.

‘They’re making my damn skin crawl,’ yelled Macks, flicking one off her earlobe.

‘Focus,’ snapped Nayl, brushing more insects off his scalp. ‘Look...’

He pointed.

‘This walkway curves all the way around to that staircase on the far side of the tower. See? If we can get around there, we can go up. The main hatch is up there.’

‘What about Eisenhorn?’ asked Drusher. He spat instinctively as an insect nearly flew into his mouth.

‘You three go around,’ said Nayl. ‘I’m going to sneak up this way and see if I can get a look at the gantry.’

He pointed to a narrow service ladder nearby that connected their catwalk to a platform six metres above.

‘We stay together,’ said Voriet.

‘This is probably going to come down to shooting,’ said Nayl. ‘Be good if we had two angles on them.’

Macks nodded.

‘Don’t be an idiot, Nayl,’ she said.

‘Too late to change my approach to life now, marshal,’ he replied. ‘Just shepherd Voriet and Balls of Steel around to the hatch, all right?’

Nayl started to climb the ladder. Macks hoisted her autorifle, flapped locustforms off her nose and mouth, and began to lead Drusher and Voriet around the catwalk ring.

Nayl reached the top of the ladder. It connected to a control platform immediately below the main gantry. There were banks of cogitator units, several of which had been smashed or damaged. On the deck, he saw traces of blood, some discarded and bloody medical dressings, and a broken injector unit.

Keeping low, he clambered over the rail onto the deck. Swarming insects billowed around him.

‘Where are they all coming from?’ Davinch asked in disgust, looking at the insects that were streaming in the air and swirling under the lighting rigs.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Gobleka. He was more fascinated by the cage and the man inside it.

‘Is this a manifestation?’ asked Davinch. ‘Is the Loom backwash doing this?’

‘I hardly care...’

‘This has never happened before, Gobleka,’ Davinch snapped. ‘We’ve had a few apports and some light displays... never this!’

He turned and looked down from the gantry rail.

‘Maybe they’re coming from below,’ he said. ‘Down in the sump, maybe. The fire...’

He trailed off. There was a man on the control platform below them. He was moving forwards, his head down.

‘Gobleka!’ Davinch yelled. He snatched out his twin laspistols and began blasting.

‘What the hell?’ Gobleka cried, turning.

‘There’s someone down there,’ yelled Davinch. ‘I think it’s one of the old bastard’s men!’

He fired again. The man he’d spotted had ducked out of sight. Davinch edged along the rail, trying to get a better angle.

He glimpsed the man again, and fired with both guns. Below, a cogitator unit blew out in a cascade of sparks.

‘Get round! Get round!’ he yelled to Gobleka.

Gobleka snatched up his autorifle, and began to move around the edge of the gantry, aiming down.

‘Where?’ he called.

‘Control deck,’ Davinch answered. He fired again. ‘Just below us!’

Shots from a large-calibre pistol cracked back up at him. One hit the gantry rim, another buckled the handrail. Davinch jerked back.

‘If you can’t plug him, push him my way!’ Gobleka shouted, aiming over the rail at the platform below.

Davinch swung back to the rail and rattled off shots with his weapons. He blew out a desk, hacked divots from the decking, overturned a wheeled stool and sent a stack of paper fluttering into the air.

Gobleka saw the target through his scope. A big, bald man, trying to keep low, pushed out of cover and back along the control deck by the fury of Davinch’s double-fire. He tracked, settled to fire—

The target vanished. Gobleka’s scope went blank, and his suppressed burst went wide. He realised a damn insect had landed on the lens of his scope. He shook the weapon to dislodge it and tried to find the target again.

Suddenly, shots were coming at him. From a different angle. They struck the gantry decking, drawing sparks as they gouged the metal. A second shooter.

Gobleka rolled aside. Where the hell was that coming from? Several more shots thukked into the gantry under him.

Below. The shooter was below him.

He slid forwards to line up.

Macks lowered her autorifle for a second.

‘Come on!’ Drusher yelled at her. ‘Germaine!’

‘I see him,’ she growled. ‘That bastard who killed Hadeed!’

She fired off another suppressed burst. Shots came back at her, plinking off the catwalk frame, shivering hundreds of settled insects into the air in an agitated flurry.

‘Move,’ she yelled at Drusher and Voriet. ‘Get to the stairs!’

Drusher looked at her and knew she wasn’t going to shift position until she’d taken her target out. He got his arm around Voriet and began to scurry around the catwalk circuit towards the stairs.

Macks kicked off another burst. She’d lost sight of the bearded man. Over the din of the machine, she could hear overlapping gunshots: Nayl’s Tronsvasse, answered by cracking bursts of las-fire.

Further volleys of heavy fire ripped across the gulf at her, rattling and scoring the catwalk. A support cable snapped with a whip-crack.

She looked around. There had to be a better angle. Blayg's autorifle had a broken strap, so she gripped it carefully, slid under the handrail on her belly, and jumped.

She landed a metre lower on the cast-iron casing of a Loom section. She teetered. The surface was slippery with machine oil. There was nothing to hold on to. She began to edge along. Locusts got in her face. Her foot slipped. She remained upright. If she followed the casing, she'd be within grabbing range of a service ladder.

Shots whined past her at a steep angle. Two pinged off the casing behind her. Macks moved fast and took a running jump off the end of the casing. She hit the ladder, and clung on with her free hand, desperate not to lose her hold on the rifle.

She started to climb.

Gobleka tried to track the woman. He saw her take a huge risk and jump from the catwalk. Now she was virtually beneath him. The damn insects were everywhere, fogging air that was already clouded with smoke.

He had to get lower. The bald man was still off to his right on the control deck beneath him, trading shots with Davinch. If he jumped down, he could probably get the drop on the bald man from behind, then take up a better angle on the elusive woman.

He took a last glance at Eisenhorn, glowing like a tiny sun in the cage, and crawled over the edge of the gantry.

He dropped and landed in a crouch on the control platform. There was no immediate sign of the bald man, but both he and Davinch would be out of sight around the curve of the deck. Gobleka stepped forwards. If Davinch was keeping the ordo thug busy, then he could come up on him from behind...

He saw movement and turned sharply. The woman was clambering up through a deck hole not three metres from him. He could see her hand on the rim, struggling to haul herself up the service ladder and retain a grip on her weapon.

Pathetic. Too easy. He raised his autorifle to hose the deck hole, the moment the woman's head appeared, and send her plunging down the long drop below.

Then he paused. The fact that any of Eisenhorn's people were still alive had come as a surprise. It was time to regain complete control of the situation.

The sound of his own movement masked by the din of the Loom, he crept forwards until he was right over the deck hole. The woman, the female marshal he'd captured earlier in the day, was climbing up with her back to him, breathing hard.

He waited, then snatched out his hand, grabbed her by the back of her jacket collar and slammed her against the rim of the hatch. She cried out in pain. He slammed again two or three more times, driving her back into the hard metal frame of the hatch. She lost her grip on her weapon, and it plummeted away.

Gobleka dragged her out of the deck hole and threw her down. She lay gasping on the deck. He rolled her onto her back, put his boot on her chest and aimed his autorifle at her face.

'How many more of you?' he asked.

She coughed and growled something. A curse.

'How. Many. More?' he snarled.

Nayl curled up tight under the cogitator bank as yet another blitz of las-fire raked the platform. The shooter was close, he had a raised angle and was wielding a pair of high-power laspistols. The onslaught was huge.

The shooter had another advantage too. His last salvo had almost killed Nayl. Nayl had only just made it to cover. He'd taken glancing shots to his right forearm and shoulder, scorching his jack armour. What would probably have been a lethal shot had been deflected by his Tronsvasse. The las-bolt had exploded off his handgun, instead of going through his face.

But the Tronsvasse was scrap. It looked fairly intact, but the impact had fused the slide and the trigger mechanism. It was basically an ugly paperweight.

The shooting had stopped. Nayl kept low, peering out. He watched the shadows. The air was thick with swarming insects and the black smoke from down below. But the strongest light source was coming from the gantry above and behind him. He could see the shadow cast by the handrail of the short access steps that linked the control deck to the platform. They were close by, just four or five metres ahead of him.

He saw another shadow. Movement.

There. The distinct shadow of two long guns held ready, panning.

The shooter was edging down the steps. He was keeping low, almost crouching against the handrail, weapons ready to fire at any movement.

Just you come closer, Nayl thought.

But it was an idle wish. There was no way the shooter wouldn't see Nayl crouching under the cogitator station, the moment he reached the control deck level. Then it would all end in a flurry of las-fire.

It was die, or bluff. Bluffing was a fool's game, but it was preferable to just dying. Nayl waited as long as he dared. He waited for the shadow to edge down further. He waited to detect the sound of a footstep on the deck.

Come on, come on...

He could see the man's shadow moving clear from the shadow of the handrail.

Now or never.

'Don't move!' Nayl yelled.

The shadow froze.

Drusher hauled the exhausted Voriet up the last few rungs of the ladder, and they sat panting on the platform in front of the tower's entry hatch. The shooting had stopped. Drusher wondered who was still alive.

Voriet sat back, eyes closed, far gone with pain and fatigue. Drusher slowly got to his feet, keeping low, and looked across the gantry.

The upper levels of the tower were heavy with black smoke. The swarming insects were everywhere, blizzarding through the dirty air. The Loom was thundering, racing at full power. A fierce light shone from the iron cage in the centre of the gantry.

There was a figure inside it.

A man, cuffed, kneeling, his back arched. A man in agony. Terrible sounds were coming out of him, terrible words that were not words. The sound of them made Drusher feel sick.

'Eisenhorn,' he murmured.

Voriet didn't reply.

'Voriet,' Drusher cried, shaking him. 'It's Eisenhorn!'

'What?' Voriet blinked at him, confused.

'That's Eisenhorn. Down there. In the cage.'

'It can't be...'

'I'm telling you it is.'

'Where are you going? Magos?'

'I'm going to get him,' said Drusher, keeping low and heading down the short flight of steps onto the gantry. 'I'm going to help him.'

'Magos!' Voriet shouted. 'Magos? Drusher... come back!'

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TWENTY-SIX

The Cage

Drusher crept onto the gantry. The light from the cage was blinding. It burned his skin. The sound of the voice burned his mind.

There was no one around. No sign of anyone. He scurried over to the cage. He could feel the awful heat of it.

Eisenhorn was rigid. He was kneeling, and the light was shining through his skin and from his eyes. Every muscle of his body was locked and seized. The chain of the cuffs binding his wrists was pulled tight.

Only his mouth was moving. Un-words dribbled from it like blood from an open wound.

‘Eisenhorn!’ Drusher called. He banged on the bars of the cage. ‘Inquisitor! Can you hear me?’

He tried the cage door. It was locked shut. Of *course* it was.

‘Eisenhorn! Talk to me! How do I get you out of here?’

Drusher felt an odd, bubbling sensation in his head.

+Leave. Me.+

‘Eisenhorn?’

+Leave me here.+

Eisenhorn’s mouth was continuing to speak un-words in a non-stop stream. But his mind was speaking separately.

‘I’m not leaving you,’ replied Drusher. He paused to spit out a locust that had flown into his mouth. ‘I said I wouldn’t, so I won’t. How do I get you out of here?’

+You don’t.+

It was a cage. A cage sealed with an un-word, just like the ones he had released Macks and Voriet from. He’d figured out how to do that. If only he had a bullet left...

‘Can you open it? Eisenhower? Eisenhower! Listen to me. Can you open the cage door? Use one of your words and open it.’

+Can’t.+

‘Why can’t you?’

+Busy.+

‘Don’t talk nonsense! Busy doing what?’

+Weaving. Building up power. To put out the fire.+

‘The fire?’ asked Drusher. He brushed away the locustforms flying around his face.

+Gobleka said snuff the fire. Save the Loom.+

‘What? You’re following *his* orders now? Eisenhower!’

+It’s almost done.+

‘Why? Why bother? This thing should burn. It’s a heretic engine, right? Right? Eisenhower?’

+A heretic engine.+

‘Then why are you trying to save it? Stop. Unlock the cage!’

‘What’s happening?’

Drusher glanced up. Voriet was standing beside him, swaying with effort.

‘He won’t come out,’ said Drusher. ‘He’s... he’s trying to put out the fire. Save the Loom.’

‘What?’ replied Voriet. He knelt down beside the cage. ‘Sir! Inquisitor! It’s Darra Voriet. What are you doing?’

+Saving the Loom.+

‘Why?’ asked Voriet.

+Because... I have mastered it. The Cognitae, they... they have shown me how. They have shown me... everything. Darra, I can use this.+

‘Use it? Sir, what are you saying?’

+I need to save the Loom.+

‘He’s gone mad,’ said Drusher.

+I need to save the Loom. I have control. I can use it to annihilate the Archenemy. Finally and forever.+

Voriet looked at Drusher.

‘He’s not mad,’ said Voriet. ‘That’s too small a word. He’s completely insane.’

Nayl slowly got out from under the cogitator bank. He kept his useless Tronsvasse aimed at Davinch.

Davinch had frozen side-on to him, his laspistols raised. He was staring at Nayl out of the corner of his eye.

‘Really don’t move,’ said Nayl.

‘Just shoot me then,’ replied Davinch.

‘Drop the guns. Do it. Toss them over the rail.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Do it,’ snapped Nayl.

‘Why didn’t you shoot?’ asked Davinch, not moving.

‘Toss the guns.’

‘You had the drop. A clear shot,’ said Davinch. ‘But you didn’t take it. No way you want me as a prisoner. Taking me back for trial and punishment? I don’t think so. So why didn’t you shoot?’

Nayl moved closer.

‘Drop the guns over the rail, now,’ he said. ‘This conversation is beginning to bore me.’

‘You can end it any time,’ said Davinch. ‘One shot. Except you didn’t take the shot. You know what I think?’

‘I don’t care what you think.’

‘I don’t think you can,’ said Davinch. ‘You’d have done it by now if you could. I think your gun’s out.’

Nayl edged a little closer. Another step and he’d be able to lunge and finish the business with his hands. He thumbed back the hammer.

‘Toss the guns,’ he said again.

‘A hammer works even on an empty gun,’ said Davinch. Nayl saw him starting to smile slightly. That confident look he’d seen so many times in his bruising life. A barely imperceptible micro-expression. That tell that gave away the fact a man was about to make a move.

Davinch snapped around to shoot. Nayl was already diving. He slammed into Davinch and body-tackled him against the rail. Both laspistols discharged, sending bolts streaming into the air.

Nayl slammed Davinch’s right wrist into the edge of the rail, and the laspistol tumbled away into space. Davinch tried to bring the left-hand pistol around. He fired again, and two shots scorched into the deck. Nayl put his full strength into keeping the man’s left arm back.

Nayl shoulder-barged Davinch in the chest, pinned him against the rail and drove the heel of his right fist into Davinch’s left thumb.

Davinich screamed in pain. His remaining laspistol went flying down the deck. It bounced and slid to a halt four metres away.

Davinich caught Nayl under the left ear with a jab. Nayl stumbled back, clutching his head. Davinich seized him by the front of his jacket with both hands, and threw him into the cogitator banks. Nayl landed badly, fragile cogitators shattering under his weight. Davinich came in fast, driving punches to Nayl's face and chest. Nayl raised hasty forearm blocks, stopped two and took a fist in the side of his mouth. He swung hard for Davinich, but missed.

Davinich turned and ran for the fallen gun. Nayl pounced and brought him down hard on the deck. They grappled. Nayl had mass on his side, but Davinich was quick with his legs. He hooked his right leg and flipped Nayl off him. Nayl got up, only to take another glancing kick to the face. He stumbled sideways.

Davinich bounced his rangy body onto its feet. Like a dancer, he threw a high spin-kick that hit Nayl in the chest and staggered him backwards. Davinich reversed his spin and threw another kick from the opposite direction. Nayl barely blocked it.

Davinich stayed on his toes. He spun around with another kick, almost in pirouette.

Nayl blundered backwards.

Try that shit again, he thought.

Davinich tilted his balance slightly and whirled into another spin-kick.

Nayl caught him squarely by the kicking ankle.

He locked it, twisted his grip and threw with full force. Utterly overbalanced, Davinich sailed backwards with a scream and went over the rail.

Somehow, he held on. White-knuckled, legs swinging, he clung to the cross struts of the handrail and began to haul himself back onto the platform.

He was half over the rail when he saw Nayl facing him, aiming the fallen laspistol.

'This one isn't out,' said Nayl.

He put four las-bolts through Davinich's head and torso.

Davinich swung backwards, stiffly, like a falling drawbridge, and plunged into the darkness.

Gobleka dragged Macks to her feet. He'd slung his autorifle across his back and drawn Eisenhower's Scipio. He pulled her against him, his arm around her throat, and put the muzzle of the pistol against her head.

'How many more?' he asked.

'Go screw yourself,' she replied. He tightened his grip and made her choke.

'Let's walk,' he said, shoving her along. A shield was useful. 'You've got a friend up here. A bald guy. He'll be pleased to see you.'

His dry laugh died away.

Ahead of them, an animation was stepping off the connecting staircase and turning to walk along the control deck towards them. It was Blayg. Green light shimmered around his dead flesh. Two more followed it, Cronyl and a halting, slower skeleton.

Gobleka froze.

'I'm a friend!' he yelled. 'Back away!'

They kept coming.

'Back away!' Gobleka ordered. He shouted an un-word order of command that stung at Macks' ear.

The animations did not falter.

Gobleka switched aim from Macks' head to Blayg. He fired, and the shot dropped Blayg in his tracks.

Macks seized the moment as soon as the gun moved away from her head. She elbowed hard into Gobleka's gut then lashed out, clamping the top of Gobleka's right wrist with her left hand and driving her right hand up into his tricep. The force almost bent his elbow the wrong way. Gobleka shrieked, the Scipio flying out of his hand.

Macks tore free from his grip. The Scipio bounced once. She dived for it. It bounced a second time. She grabbed at it, and missed it by a hair's breadth.

It disappeared over the edge of the deck.

She knew she was done. The animations were right on her. She curled into a ball, her legs tucked under her, her hands over her head, and waited for the horror to end her.

Nothing happened.

She looked up. Cronyl and the lurching skeleton had moved past her, ignoring her. They were making straight for Gobleka.

He stared at them in horror, eyes wide.

‘Back off! Back off!’ he yelled. He tried more un-words as he wrestled to get his rifle off his shoulder.

Macks got down as flat as she could. Still yelling un-words, Gobleka hosed Cronyl and the skeleton with bursts of autofire. The furious volley ripped across the control deck stations, but left the advancing animations untouched.

Gobleka turned to run. Macks saw his staring, violet eyes as he broke to flee.

She had never seen terror like it.

‘Why not her?’ he cried. ‘Why not *her*?’

Gobleka ran to evade the reaching hands of Cronyl and the skeleton thing, and found Audla Jaff, slack and loose-limbed like a hanged man, advancing from the opposite direction.

Her ruined, dead face blank and tilted to one side, Jaff embraced him. A moment later, Cronyl and the skeleton reached him too, their hands on his back, on his shoulders.

Gobleka began a scream, but it faltered and broke. Green sparks, like a raging swarm of insects, whirled around him, spreading from each point of contact, each clasping hand. As the sparks spread, Gobleka vanished. His clothes shredded away and became dust. His living skin turned to paper and withered like powder and ash. Beneath, tissue and muscle and fat rendered down, exposing bones that deformed like melting wax.

In less than ten seconds, Goran Gobleka was reduced to a few misshapen bones and a deformed, stained, screaming skull that fell to the deck between the three animations, and lay smouldering and sparking.

The animations stood over the steaming heap for a moment, then moved on without reaction, disappearing down the curve of the platform.

Macks rose to her feet, shaking.

‘Marshal?’

She turned. Nayl was limping towards her. He looked like he had been kicked and punched repeatedly. He was carrying a laspistol.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

She brushed locusts away from her face.

‘I think the rules just changed, Nayl,’ she replied.

‘You have to stop, sir,’ Vorieta said. ‘You have to stop this now.’

He was slumped against the bars of the cage, too tired to do anything except speak, too weary to brush away the locustforms that were settling on

him and crawling on his face.

‘Listen to him!’ Drusher yelled through the bars.

+This is a chance. The Cognitae have handed it to me. I won’t waste it.+

‘To do what?’ asked Drusher. ‘Use their machine against them? To achieve what?’

+An ending.+

‘To what?’

+The Long War. The primordial fight.+

‘Wh-what are you intending to do, sir?’ asked Voriet.

+Control the fire. Then... increase the rate of the Loom. Unpick a hole in the warp. Open one space into another. An extimate fold. Between here and... Queen Mab.+

‘What is that?’ asked Voriet.

+The City of Dust. Another... another extimate space, I think. I’m going to open it wide and engulf the King in Yellow. Unmake him on his own Loom. Uncreate him word by word.+

‘Sir, this is a heresy that must end,’ said Voriet. ‘You are employing devices and powers beyond our understanding—’

+I understand.+

‘Do you? Do you really?’ yelled Drusher. ‘Or is this just the obsession coming out again? The old drive? The old desperation? The old craziness that doesn’t recognise when it’s time to stop?’

+You are outspoken, Valentin Drusher. You are ignorant.+

Drusher kicked the bars of the cage.

‘You’re the one locked in a magical frigging cage trying to unpick the fabric of reality,’ he yelled. ‘I’d rather be ignorant than crazy!’

He looked at Voriet.

‘Unpick the fabric of reality, near enough?’ he asked.

Voriet managed a shrug. ‘I think, pretty much. Yeah.’

Drusher knelt down and stared through the bars.

‘I’m not ignorant,’ he said. ‘I’m very knowledgeable. Educated. I’m smart enough to know my own limits. Do you know yours? Do you know when a good idea stops being a good idea? Do you know what “too far” looks like?’

+Enough, magos.+

‘What happens when you do this?’ asked Drusher. ‘Does Keshtre collapse? Do you die? Do we die?’

+Perhaps.+

‘We came back for you!’ Drusher snarled.

+I did not ask you to.+

‘You did, actually. You asked for my help. I asked for yours, but you refused. That’s all right. But I said I’d come and help you. Now you don’t want my help.’

+I don’t need it.+

‘So tell me what happens when you do this?’ said Drusher. ‘Some kind of cataclysmic cosmic event, I shouldn’t wonder. Continental upheaval. Planets imploding. Stars blowing out. Another Long Night. Am I close?’

+The King will die.+

‘Fine, what else?’ Drusher asked. ‘How many people die here on Gershom if you do this? How many people in... What was it called? Queen Mab? How many innocents? How many children?’

Eisenhorn’s mind did not reply.

‘Who is Beta?’ asked Voriet.

‘I don’t know,’ Drusher replied. ‘But the name was just in my head too. Did that feel like sadness? Regret?’

Voriet nodded.

‘Eisenhorn!’ Drusher yelled at the cage. ‘What else happens? You can’t know everything. What are the consequences of a catastrophe like the one you’re trying to create? You’re messing with space and reality, splitting them open. Talk about ignorant! No one knows about that stuff. If you damage the universe that badly, does the damage stop? What if it spreads and you can’t halt it?’

+The King will be dead.+

‘Oh, well as long as the King’s dead, that’s all right,’ said Drusher. ‘You know what, Eisenhorn? You know what? I don’t think you know anything, or you don’t care. You’re about to execute a dreadful act of destruction, and you have no clue what the consequences will be. What if you break reality forever? Break it so it can’t heal or repair? Rip it open? So what if the King’s dead... That will be it. You’ll have destroyed the very thing you’ve spent your life protecting!’

+I know what I am doing.+

‘I don’t think you do,’ said Drusher.

+Magos. Valentin. I... I will open a door. An exit out of Keshtre. You get out. Take Voriet with you. Macks and Nayl too. They live still. I have done

my best to protect them. Get out, and I will try to contain the damage I am about to do. I will... contain it. You will live. Please... get them. Get out.+

Drusher rose to his feet. He flicked insects off his face.

‘He doesn’t understand, does he?’ he asked Voriet. ‘He doesn’t understand people.’

‘I don’t think it’s ever been part of the job description,’ said Voriet. ‘Do as he says, Drusher. Find Macks and Nayl, and get out while you can. I’m a bit tired. I’ll stay here. Sit with him until the end.’

‘Not an option,’ said Drusher. ‘For Throne’s sake! But for a bit of wax and a custom bullet I could open that cage. I’ve still got the bloody gun.’

He produced the empty little Regit snub from his coat.

‘See?’

He stuffed it back in his pocket, despairing. His knuckles touched something else in his pocket. He took the gun back out and reached in.

‘Voriet?’

‘What?’

‘I miscounted,’ said Drusher. ‘I took a bullet out of the gun to open your cages. Macks never put it back in the clip when she reloaded it for me.’

He held out his hand. The bullet lay in his palm.

‘Seven shots,’ he said. ‘Not eight. I miscounted.’

Voriet blinked in surprise.

‘We don’t have any wax, magos,’ he said.

‘Balls to that,’ said Drusher. He did what he’d seen Nayl do. He drew back the Regit’s slide, opened the firing chamber and slipped the bullet in. Then he snapped the slide shut.

‘Step back,’ he said.

Voriet struggled to his feet.

‘Magos? What are you—’

‘Step well back, Voriet. I’m not very good with guns.’

Drusher took careful aim.

And fired.



TWENTY-SEVEN

How to Let a Wild Thing Out of a Cage, and What Happens When You Do

The gun Macks had given him all those years ago barked, and sparks blinked off the cage frame.

‘Holy Throne!’ said Voriet. ‘I thought you were aiming at Eisenhower!’

‘I was,’ said Drusher. He smiled at Voriet. ‘Not really, I was aiming for the cage.’

‘Oh, well... Good shot.’

‘Voriet, it was *ten centimetres* away.’

Drusher bent down.

‘I think it worked,’ he said.

He pulled at the cage door, and it swung open, groaning on its hinges.

Drusher started to speak, but things began to change rapidly. The light radiating out of Eisenhower began to diminish. There was a screeching, squealing din as the mechanism of the Loom began to slow down, gears faltering, cogs decelerating. The chirring row of the swarm grew louder. There were insects and smoke everywhere.

Eisenhower went limp and fell sideways. His mouth stopped moving. The violet glare in his eyes went out. Blood dribbled from the corner of his lips.

‘Get him out!’ Drusher yelled.

‘You’ll have to help me,’ said Voriet.

Between them, they scrabbled and dragged the big, heavy body clear of the cage.

‘Is he dead?’ asked Drusher.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Voriet.

‘I might as well have shot him,’ said Drusher.

He heard someone calling out his name. Nayl and Macks were hurrying across the gantry towards them, waving insects out of their faces.

‘What happened?’ Nayl asked, crouching beside Voriet.

‘Difficult to sum up,’ said Voriet. ‘The magos had an idea, so—’

‘What did you do now?’ asked Macks, turning to Drusher.

‘I’d like to think something good,’ said Drusher. ‘But, who knows?’

She looked at him.

‘You all right?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘You?’

‘Fine.’

‘I’ve missed you,’ he said.

‘It’s been ten minutes,’ she said.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I meant...’

She hugged him tight.

‘You silly bastard,’ she whispered.

‘He’s breathing!’ said Voriet.

‘Well, she clamped on quite tight there,’ said Drusher, ‘but I’m fine—’

‘*Eisenhorn* is breathing,’ said Nayl.

They knelt down around him.

‘Need to do something about these cuffs,’ said Nayl.

‘No idea where the key is,’ said Macks.

Eisenhorn opened his eyes. They were pale and looked very old.

‘You shouldn’t have stopped me,’ said Eisenhorn quietly. He was staring up at Drusher.

‘Well, I think I should,’ said Drusher.

‘I was close,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘The King was going to fall.’

‘He’ll fall one day,’ said Drusher. ‘Sometimes it’s important to do a small thing.’

Eisenhorn sat up slowly.

‘Why did you say that?’ he asked.

‘No reason.’

‘Someone said...’ Eisenhorn began. ‘Someone said something like that to me. I think I was dreaming. My mind is whirling.’

They helped him to his feet.

‘Magos Drusher,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘You may face the censure of the ordos for your actions today.’

‘Yep,’ said Drusher. ‘And so will you. And I know which set of charges I’d rather be accused of.’

The smoke was getting thicker. Their clothes were heavy with the weight of crawling insects. From far below, they could hear the groan of tortured metal.

‘I vote we leave,’ said Nayl. ‘As fast as we can.’

They headed for the steps, left the gantry and walked towards the hatch. Macks and Drusher helped Voriet between them. Nayl gave his arm to support the limping Eisenhorn.

The hatch was open. They went through into the long, tall hallway of the shade hall. It was cooler there, but smoke was flowing out of the tower and gathering in thick black folds up in the high ceiling. Insects covered every surface, chirring and ticking. They swarmed in the air.

‘Did you open a door?’ asked Voriet.

‘I think so,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I feel a breeze,’ said Macks.

A figure stood in the hallway ahead of them.

It was Draven Sark. He had bathed and shaved off his beard and filthy hair. He wore the long white robes of a magos of Materia Medica.

‘You should have finished your work,’ he said.

Nayl raised his laspistol.

‘Come with us or stand aside, Sark,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Goran made such a mistake,’ said Sark, gliding forwards. ‘He thought you were usable. Transmutable. What a fool. You cannot make a heretic out of someone who is *already* a heretic.’

+Stand aside.+

Sark winced slightly.

‘That will of yours,’ he said. ‘Indomitable. Unbroken, even by the Torment. You were already where the Torment wanted to take you. It just made you stronger.’

He smiled.

‘It made you stronger, and yet you still did not have the strength and purpose to finish your work. You could have defeated us, and you failed. Human weakness got in the way.’

‘Not *my* weakness,’ said Eisenhorn.

Sark shrugged. ‘Human weakness. It is why your side will lose, and the Rot-God-King will fall. It is why we will prevail.’

Nayl fired. The las-bolt hit Sark and left nothing but a tiny scorch mark on his white gown.

Sark's eyes lit with a violet glare. A wall of force slammed down the hallway. Nayl, Macks, Drusher and Voriet were hurled off their feet, and went tumbling as if cast by a hurricane wind. Swarming insects billowed everywhere.

Eisenhorn remained standing.

'I will unmake you now,' said Sark. 'Punishment for your abuse of the Loom, and for your obstruction of our work.'

There was another gust of force. Eisenhorn groaned and sank to one knee. The magos advanced upon him.

'We have both known the Torment, Gregor Eisenhorn,' he said. 'It has changed us both. It has made me stronger. I carry it with me.'

'You carry... *something*...' said Eisenhorn, struggling to remain upright.

'I will cast you to the wind,' said the magos, 'and I will save the Loom. The Great Work will continue.'

'Go to hell,' grunted Eisenhorn.

Sark blasted him again. Insects billowed up, moving as one, and covered Eisenhorn from head to foot, writhing and ticking. Eisenhorn bent his head and raised his cuffed fists in front of him, like a man at penance.

'Fall,' said the magos, and unleashed his power again. Eisenhorn slid back along the marble floor.

'The King seeks to tame us,' said Sark. 'Chain us. Harness us with incantation. What little he knows. How small he thinks. Freed from his bounds, loosed in your world, we will do such *wonders*.'

Drusher hauled Macks to her feet, trying to shield them both from the surging wind and boiling clouds of insects. Nayl dragged Voriet upright.

They all staggered backwards as the magos blasted again with invisible power.

Eisenhorn looked up at Sark. Even moving his head took great effort. He raised his cuffed hands in front of his face. He was quaking, like a great oak in a gale, about to splinter.

He spoke an un-word.

The force of it struck Sark full in the face. It also struck the cuff-chain binding Eisenhorn's wrists and exploded it, driving metal fragments into the magos like buckshot.

Sark staggered backwards, blood streaming from a dozen wounds in his face. They bled like stigmata, dripping onto the white cloth of his gown. His left eye was gone.

He screamed at Eisenhorn in rage. The un-word knocked Eisenhorn backwards. His hands now free, he clutched at the hallway wall to stay upright. He answered with an un-word that struck the magos like a sledgehammer.

The insect swarm became frenzied. Their mass clung to the high, white walls, scoring marks in the stone. In long, threading lines, they were inscribing the words of Enuncia that Eisenhorn and Sark were hurling at each other. Drusher realised where the odd script lining the walls of the tower had come from. The ancient, chirring cackle of prehuman times, recorded syllable by syllable in the fabric of the world, marks in stone left by things before man, the swarming plagues of truth and destruction, the litany of the Torment.

Face-to-face, enveloped in a whirlwind of light and hammering air, Eisenhorn and Sark yelled un-words at each other, trying to un-make each other's flesh and souls. Eisenhorn's eyes shone violet, as bright as Sark's remaining pupil.

With fury, Eisenhorn screamed and drove Sark backwards.

'Go! Go!' he yelled to the others. 'Get out! He's not human!'

'And you *are*?' asked Drusher, shielding his eyes.

+*Get out!*+

They tried to struggle past the two figures, but the wind was too strong, the concussion of the un-words too great. Eisenhorn focused and began to drive the un-words out of him with his mind instead of his mouth. He drove them with the will that impressed Magos Sark so much.

Sark was hurled back against the wall. It cracked behind him. Chirring insects etched words around his form. Pinned, he writhed, screaming. Black dust began to puff out of his skin as it desiccated and shrivelled. The howls coming from his wide-stretched mouth shattered the windows overhead. Glass rained down.

The black dust continued to spray out of him. He was becoming a skeletal thing, wrapped in the white cloth of his robes. He slid slowly down the wall.

'Move!' cried Eisenhorn.

'You broke him,' yelled Voriet.

‘No,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Not even slightly.’

Locustforms fluttered around them. A door stood open at the end of the hallway. It had not been there before. Daylight shone through it.

‘Quickly,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Quickly. Don’t look back.’

And they were outside. The Karanine glade. Early evening. The old and mossy rocks of Keshtre Fortress lay around them in the undergrowth.

It was a still evening, but a sharp wind was blowing across the glade, swaying the old trees that faced them.

Drusher looked back.

A sliver of darkness stood behind them, a vertical slit in space like the shadow of a half-open door. The wind was spilling out of it, carrying smoke and clouds of locusts. The sliver was just standing there without a frame or any reference to the forest, a wound to another world.

+Thorn wishes Talon. Aegis, uplifting, a door without walls. Pattern Hawk.+

‘What was *that*?’ asked Macks, holding her head.

‘Keep moving,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘We have to get as far away as possible.’

‘From what?’ asked Drusher.

‘Sark’s not dead, is he?’ asked Voriet.

‘The human part is,’ said Eisenhorn. They were stumbling through the trees, locusts buzzing around them. ‘The shell is gone. But not the thing that took up residence inside Magos Draven Sark during those long years he spent inside the cage.’

‘What kind of thing?’ asked Drusher, wishing he hadn’t.

‘Something of the warp,’ said Voriet.

‘Let’s use the word daemon,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘Oh, let’s *not*!’ exclaimed Drusher.

‘Can you close the door?’ yelled Nayl, trying to help Voriet to keep up. ‘Shut it in there?’

‘Not any more,’ said Eisenhorn.

They ran down the slope, through the ancient woodland. There was a stream ahead. All the birds had fallen silent, as if knowing it was time to be elsewhere.

A wind howled down the high valley from the slit in the world. Trees hushed and swayed. From the Keshtre site two hundred metres behind them, they heard the air popping and tearing, squeaking and splitting as

something wrenched it open like a medicae surgeon levering apart a chest with rib-spreaders.

They splashed across the stream to the far bank. Behind them, they heard trees collapsing, torn up from the roots. Voriet could barely stay with them. Nayl and Drusher grabbed him to carry him.

Drusher heard another sound, a different howling. It was high-pitched, and the roar of it shook his insides.

A shadow passed over them. This was Eisenhorn's daemon, surely. He didn't want to look.

He did anyway, in time to see a massive orbital gunship pass overhead. It was moving so low it slammed through the upper branches of the tree canopy, showering down twigs and leaves. Its burners flared as it slowed and turned. The ground shook.

'We need a clearing,' yelled Nayl. 'Medea can't bring that in here.'

'Two hundred metres that way!' shouted Drusher.

'Really?' asked Nayl.

'Well, maybe three hundred,' replied Drusher. 'I remember Fargul's maps!'

They turned the way he had pointed and began to wade through the underbrush. Locusts still purred past their faces.

'Keep going,' cried Eisenhorn.

'This is insane!' yelled Macks.

'Medea is telling me... keep going,' Eisenhorn replied.

Overhead, impossibly huge and low, the gun-cutter swung around hard, attitude jets flaming. Nose down and lifting slightly, it moved back up the slope towards the Keshtre site.

Something was erupting up through the trees, pushing them down and splintering them back. Stone by stone, the walls of Keshtre Fortress were rebuilding themselves, rising up, pale and loam-caked, out of the old earth.

And something was climbing out of the fortress mound.

Something tall and slender, four times the height of any tree in the Karanines, rose up from behind the ragged curtain of stone. Then, a second, a third.

Drusher stared in amazement. He knew what they were. He'd seen them before. Seen them in a microscope field, magnified a thousand times so he could examine the joints, the chitinous cuticle structure, the black strands of hair follicles that sensed movement and vibration.

Spider legs. Some arachnid form, anyway. A xenos variety of *chelicerata*.

But these limbs were not under a microscope. They were two hundred metres long.

‘That’s not local,’ he said.

‘It’s not an arachnid either,’ said Eisenhorn.

‘A daemon, is it?’

‘A plague daemon,’ said Eisenhorn.

The joints flexed, the legs stepping up over the fortress wall, gaining grip to raise the body behind them. Imagination was no longer Valentin Drusher’s worst enemy. Imagination was woefully inadequate compared to this.

The world rattled. The gun-cutter had taken station and opened fire, hosing the fortress site with ordnance from its gunpods, chin-turret and underwing racks.

Fire bloomed in huge hemispheres, ripping up soil, splintered wood and fractured stone, five hectares of woodland laid waste.

The gun-cutter swayed slightly and unleashed again. Rapid-rate las-fire ripped from its chin-mount.

‘Throne of Earth, that’ll flatten the whole world!’ cried Drusher.

‘No,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘Medea’s just trying to keep it at bay. To hold it back and buy us time.’

‘To do what?’

‘Reach the clearing.’

Drusher looked back, still running. The huge dark mass was rising up out of the smoke and raging flames that enveloped it.

It lashed out with its long, clawed limbs. Then tendrils whipped out from the half-seen body mass too. They were organic and boneless: tentacles, or pustular cords, or maybe ragged loops of intestine. Drusher could smell the stench of rot and faecal waste.

One of the huge limbs struck the gun-cutter a glancing blow, it veered hard to the right, jets howling to compensate. The engines shrieked.

‘She’s too low!’ Nayl yelled.

The gun-cutter was ploughing sideways, ripping through treetops and pulverising trunks. It was beginning to shake and rotate, unable to pull clear. There was no room to gain lift and energy.

‘Oh Throne!’ Voriet wailed.

+Medea!+

There was a long, terrible crashing noise of trees uprooting. The gun-cutter vanished behind the treeline.

The thing from the warp pulled itself clear of Keshtre's walls on its vast legs.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

Unwoven

‘I think this is probably all my fault,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘If you hadn’t pulled me out of the cage, Sark would have killed me in it. Taken control of the Loom again. And the thing inside him... It is a *greater daemon*, Drusher. And one not bound and trapped by the King in Yellow’s conjurations. It has used Sark as a loophole, a door into our space, freed from the proscriptions of summoning and binding. Sark has unwittingly unleashed a greater and far more immediate threat to Imperial space than the damned King in Yellow.’

They had reached the clearing. It was an old patch of hill pasture that sloped down to the woods at the base of the valley.

Drusher looked back. He couldn’t see the daemon, but a vast fog of buzzing blackness veiled the sky beyond the nearest trees. A mass swarm. Trillions of insects, bathed in filthy light.

The ground vibrated. Footsteps, thought Drusher. Giant, scuttling footsteps. In the distance, landslips kicked off by the vibrations thundered down the mountains, raising plumes of dust.

Behind them, something in the black fog screamed. A bellow, an exhalation. An *exaltation*. It boomed out across the Karanines, echoing from peak to peak. A deep, wet, clotted pulsing howl like the droning note of a giant Udaric war-horn, but one big enough to swallow the world.

Drusher wondered how to face his death. He wondered how a man did that, and if it mattered. He felt like sinking to his knees, but that was just the exhaustion. He doubted there was a protocol for facing death when your death was an abomination the size of a city.

He decided to stand and face it, whatever it was going to be. He damn well *wasn’t* going to cry. It had been a good life, really. Hard work, some

insane adventures. A few, sweet, maddening years somewhere in the middle that he wouldn't have given up for anything. *Shouldn't* have given up for anything.

Macks was tugging at his arm.

'What?' he asked.

'What are you doing?'

He shrugged.

'Facing death,' he replied. 'What else is there?'

She sighed.

'Not a lot, now,' she replied.

'You *see* the trouble you get me in?' he said.

'Bet you wished you'd never met me,' she said.

'Not even once,' he replied.

The howling came again. Wind rushed across them.

The gun-cutter rose up behind the trees on the edge of the pasture, jets screaming. Nose down, it swept across the grass, lifting clouds of spinning leaves and stalks into the air. Drusher could see the amber-lit cockpit. Medea, grim-faced, pulling on the controls.

The forward ramp was lowering even before she put the big craft down on its heavy undercarriage.

They ran up the ramp.

'*Are you all in?*' Medea's voice crackled through the intercabin vox.

'Go!' Nayl yelled.

'Handholds!' Eisenhower ordered.

They grabbed what they could. Eisenhower pushed Voriet into an acceleration couch and held him down. Macks grabbed an overhead strap, then grabbed Drusher as he staggered past.

The gun-cutter lifted. The ramp wasn't even shut. Drusher could see the ground dropping away, the pasture...

The gun-cutter swung, lifting its nose. Everyone lurched the other way. Now, Drusher could see evening sky through the still-closing ramp. Acceleration pulled at them hard.

'Strap in,' ordered Eisenhower. 'Medea! Brace for shock wave in three!'

'Shock wave?' asked Macks.

'I can feel it coming,' said Eisenhower. 'The fire, you see? It was never put out.'

The gun-cutter climbed on maximum thrust, racing into the high altitudes of the great peaks.

Behind it, in the black fog of the valley, there was a blink. A flash of violet light and jade-green electrical discharge.

A two-kilometre square patch of the woodland folded into itself, and vanished.

Then, the shock wave.

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TWENTY-NINE

At the Closing of the World

‘Caffeine?’ asked Medea.

She held out a tin mug to Drusher.

‘Thanks,’ he said as he took it.

‘Took me a while to find you,’ she said. ‘What are you doing up here?’

‘Taking a last look, really,’ he said.

From the old walls of Helter, they could see across the valley. It had been raining since before dawn. Rain tapped off the Magistratum slickers they were both wearing. It spotted the lenses of Drusher’s old spectacles, but he could see well enough. Less than a kilometre away, the forest was gone, the earth scorched smooth. Great clouds of vapour were still rising off the scar.

‘You fly well,’ he said.

‘There was incentive,’ she replied. ‘Besides, it’s what he pays me to do.’

‘You’d do it even if he didn’t pay you,’ he said.

‘There is sadly a great deal of truth in that,’ she said. ‘Magos, you and Macks... You could use some support after this. He won’t mention it or offer it, because, well, you know... but trust me. You don’t feel it yet, but you’ve experienced trauma. Physical trauma. And existential trauma too. There is a confessor I can recommend in Tycho. Better still, off-world specialists on Gudrun, if you’re still planning to leave. They have some experience and are discreet. We’ve used them before. The Houses of the ordos could offer you some consolation, but I don’t recommend it. You’d open yourself to a different world of hurt.’

He nodded.

‘By rights,’ she said, ‘you both would be considered... *contaminated* by what you’ve seen. The ordos would want you restrained from public

contact, at the very least. The *very least*. And even if you speak to the discreet confessors I have recommended, don't say anything stupid.'

'Like?'

'Like mentioning the word *daemon*.'

'All right,' said Drusher.

'But take a recommendation, please,' she said. 'And make Macks do it too. What you've seen this last day or so... No one should ever see that. It will scar you, I'm sorry to say. Change you. Maybe for the rest of your life.'

'I'd be slightly horrified if it *didn't*, Mam Betancore,' he replied. He sipped the caffeine. 'How is Voriet?'

'Nayl and Macks have taken him to the infirmary in Unkara. They voxed just now. He's stable. Young and strong.'

'Good,' said Drusher.

'Eisenhorn wants to see you,' she said. 'He sent me to find you.'

'All right,' said Drusher. 'Will he tell me what happened?'

'Probably not,' she said.

'Will you, then?'

She shrugged.

'As I understand these things,' she said, 'it was the Loom in the end. Damaged by the fire, but a volatile mechanism anyway.'

'Aren't we all?' said Drusher.

'It's not possible to construct them in real space,' she said, 'because of the interference patterns they generate. It was stable only in the extimate fold of the shade hall.'

'And the...' Drusher found he really didn't want to say the word 'daemon'. 'And the thing, it opened that up?'

'Yes,' said Medea. 'Reality was no longer overlapping. It was simultaneous. It was just a matter of time before the fabric of... reality... shredded. Imploded. And took everything with it. Keshtre. A sizeable patch of ground and subsoil.'

'And... the thing itself.'

'Yes.'

'Was he counting on that?' asked Drusher. 'Eisenhorn, I mean? Was he counting on that happening?'

'I believe he was hoping. It was the only possible good outcome. Nothing else on Gershom would have stopped it.'

‘Is it still out there?’ Drusher asked. ‘I mean, is it trapped inside the shade hall?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘That extimate fold is gone. Obliterated. An empyrean gravity compression effect that... Well, I won’t bore you with the technical detail.’

‘So it’s dead?’

She shook her head.

‘Things like that can’t die. It’s been cast back into the warp where it came from. It’s still out there... or in there... somewhere. Sorry.’

‘No wonder you recommend unburdening,’ he said. ‘I’m worrying what I will begin to say to the poor confessor I visit.’

He wandered up to the old man’s library. Eisenhower was tossing books from the shelves into a pile on the floor.

‘We need to burn this place,’ he said. ‘The books, the bodies. Everything. I’ve briefed Macks on how to contain the situation. A cover story. An accident during fleet manoeuvres. Something to keep the governor satisfied. And the ordos off Macks’ back.’

‘They’ll come looking,’ said Drusher.

‘Without doubt, but eventually,’ said Eisenhower. ‘And when they get here, they’ll find very little. And a lot of people who know zero.’

‘Is this the part where you reprimand me?’ asked Drusher. ‘Or, I don’t know, burn me along with the books?’

‘No, I wanted to thank you,’ said Eisenhower.

‘Really?’

‘You did more than was asked,’ said Eisenhower. ‘And your expertise was invaluable at several key points.’

‘Well, you asked for help.’

‘I believe I owe you passage off-world,’ said Eisenhower. ‘That was the deal. You’re a clever man, Drusher, and a great deal of *purpose* still awaits you. A greater career you can accomplish. You should not stay here and waste the rest of your life on a backwater planet that you no longer love.’

‘I’ve found it has more to it than I first imagined,’ Drusher replied.

‘I can’t give you passage,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Things are complicated and we must leave shortly. But there’s a bag on the chaise there. Take it, with my thanks.’

Drusher walked over to the old chaise, picked up the small leather kitbag and opened it.

‘Right,’ he said.

‘There is an alternative,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Don’t take the bag. Come with us instead.’

‘With you?’

‘It will be more insane adventures, I’m afraid.’

‘Yes, but *with* you?’

‘I have very few friends,’ said Eisenhower. ‘Probably none, in fact. And I can’t call on many people for help any more. I could use a clever man at my side. I’m running out of allies, and where I’m going...’

‘Sancour?’

‘Yes.’

‘The city of Queen Mab?’

‘Indeed.’

‘You want me to go with you?’

‘As I said, magos, I can count the people who now stand with me on the fingers of one hand. You are a specialist, an expert advisor, and you have shown your mettle.’

‘I thought you hated me for pulling you out of that cage,’ said Drusher.

‘I’ve had time to reflect,’ said Eisenhower. ‘If you hadn’t, it would have ended badly.’

‘That’s what ending *well* looks like?’ asked Drusher.

‘Often.’

‘But you’re still going on,’ said Drusher, ‘to Queen Mab, on Sancour?’

‘Yes, magos.’

‘Will you ever stop?’ asked Drusher. ‘I mean, will you ever know *when* to stop? When it’s enough... When it is *too much*...’

‘I hope so,’ said Eisenhower. ‘I hope at least I will have wise people around me to advise me so. To be honest though, magos, I don’t think a man like me ever retires. That’s not how it works.’

‘I don’t think a man like you retires either,’ he added. ‘I think that’s what you’ve been trying to tell yourself all along. That there’s more to you, more to your life. Come with me, if you’d care to. You have seen things now. You have been tempered by this experience. Everything that follows will be less of a shock.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Drusher. ‘But I don’t think I will.’

‘I thought there was nothing left to keep you here?’ Eisenhower asked.

‘So did I,’ said Drusher.

Eisenhorn walked over to him and held out his hand.

‘Then thank you for your service,’ he said. ‘We won’t meet again, but I have appreciated your company.’

Drusher shook his hand.

‘You look well, inquisitor,’ he said. ‘Better than you did when I first met you. Which, given what we’ve endured, is quite something. You seem stronger.’

‘I am.’

‘You’ve been tempered by this too, then?’

‘I think so,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘I feel stronger than I have in years. Ready to face the endgame.’

‘Is that a good thing?’ asked Drusher.

‘Yes,’ said Eisenhorn. He smiled.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile before,’ said Drusher.

‘It’s not something I’ve done in a long time,’ said Eisenhorn.



THIRTY

The Old Place

Evening was rolling in, a violet haze off the sea. It was two days after Drusher had stood and watched the fortress of Helter burn.

Macks rolled the Magistratum cruiser to a halt and pulled up on the shingle beside the old highway.

‘Really?’ she said. ‘Back here?’

‘It suits me,’ he said.

She shrugged. She was trying to appear cheerful, he could tell. But they were both still in their heads. There was a tremor in his hands that wouldn’t go away. The universe would never seem the same to either of them.

‘Will you come in?’ he asked.

‘I’ve got to get back,’ she said. ‘If I turn around now I can make it to Unkara by dawn. There’s a lot of clearing up to do. A lot of paperwork. A whole lot of crap, in fact, including a meeting with the governor tomorrow night.’

‘Good luck with that.’

‘Oh, well, you know,’ she said. ‘But I’ll come back and visit.’

‘Don’t leave it too long.’

They looked at each other. He leaned forwards and kissed her. He could smell *True Heart* very faintly. The kiss lingered.

‘Get on,’ she said. ‘I’ve got to go back.’

He got out of the cruiser and hefted his bag onto his shoulder. She pulled down in a circle and drove back onto the hem of the highway. He raised a hand, a little wave. She stopped and slid down her window.

‘*Why* does this place suit you?’ she called out.

‘Because you’ll know where to find me,’ he replied.

Macks grinned. She roared away onto the highway.

Drusher watched her lights fade into the twilight. He turned and looked at the old shack. He could hear the rush of the waves on the beach behind him. He could see the sky turning dark like a bruise along the wasteland horizon beyond the dunes.

He walked into the shack. It smelled dry and stale. It was just as he had left it. He put his bag on the table, opened the hall cupboard and cranked on the generator.

He lit a lamp. Outside, the Bone Coast evening was falling fast.

He opened his old bag and unpacked a few bits and pieces. Some food he'd bought in Unkara town. A can of caffeine Medea Betancore had given him. His taxonomy. A folded Magistratum rain slicker, just the thing for wet days. The Regit snub, cleaned and reloaded, with two boxes of shells. Eisenhorn's parting gift, the small leather bag. Esic Fargul's sketchbook with its faded green cover, and an old, annotated book on bird migration.

He went out into the yard behind the shack to watch the last of the day. Seabirds were circling. It *was* sort of beautiful, he thought.

The sea raptor was sitting on the beach fence. It watched him. He smiled at it.

It spread its wings, and flew down, landing at his feet.

'I let you go,' he said. 'You wanted to get out so much.'

It stared at him.

'There's no hope for either of us, is there?' he asked.

He went into the kitchen, opened the wax paper bindings of the provisions he'd bought and brought back a couple of slices of good, cured Karanine ham. He held one out to it.

Its beak snapped as it took it. But Drusher still had all his fingers.

'You old bastard,' he said.

Several nights later, he was working at his table late when lights went by on the highway. He looked up every time a set of lights went past, hoping.

This set, southbound, slowed down and pulled up on the gravel outside. He heard crunching footsteps.

'Don't make a fuss,' he told the raptor perched on the back of the chair facing him. It turned its beady eyes to the front door. 'I'm warning you,' he said. 'I'll put you outside.'

He opened the door before the knock came.

Drusher's smile ebbed slightly. It wasn't her.

'Interrogator Voriet,' he said.

Voriet was patched with dressings, and his arm was in a sling.

‘Magos,’ he said. ‘I apologise for the late hour. Marshal Macks told me where you were.’

‘She remembers then,’ said Drusher. That was something.

‘May I come in?’

‘Why not?’ replied Drusher, holding the door wide.

Voriet stepped inside. He looked with some alarm at the sea raptor. It had taken up a perch on the top of the dresser and clacked its beak at the interrogator.

‘Is that quite safe?’ asked Voriet.

‘Don’t mind him,’ said Drusher.

‘Are you... keeping it as a pet?’

‘Not really. It just won’t leave.’

‘Have you given it a name?’ Voriet asked.

‘No,’ Drusher lied.

Voriet cleared his throat.

‘Speaking of leaving,’ he said. ‘He’s gone.’

‘Who?’

‘You know very well,’ said Voriet. ‘Eisenhorn. He and Nayl and Medea. They’ve gone. Made shift. Left Gershom.’

‘And they’ve left you here?’

‘Yes,’ said Voriet.

‘Are you surprised?’ asked Drusher. ‘I mean, he knew. Eisenhorn knew all about you. He couldn’t trust you, could he?’

‘He *could*,’ said Voriet. ‘After all that. He should have known that he could. I’m disappointed. I thought... Anyway...’

‘Caffeine?’ asked Drusher.

‘Thank you, no,’ said Voriet. ‘I can’t stay. I’m leaving Gershom tomorrow. I’m going to the ordos, to make a full report.’

‘Are you?’

‘A full report,’ said Voriet. ‘I intend to... to... make the case for him. Insist that they revise their ruling. Reconsider his status. Perhaps offer him support and assistance with his undertaking.’

‘His *war*?’

‘Yes, that.’ Voriet looked awkward. ‘I want to help him,’ he said. ‘And I need to offer the ordos information to establish good faith. Do you know where he’s gone?’

‘Eisenhorn?’

‘Yes. Did he tell you where he was going?’

‘He’s off on his insane adventures,’ said Drusher. ‘Off to find the King in Yellow.’

‘I know that,’ said Voriet.

‘Then you know as much as I do, interrogator.’

‘He mentioned a place,’ said Voriet. ‘Queen Mab. The City of Dust. You mentioned it too.’

‘It could be anywhere,’ said Drusher. ‘*Literally*,’ he added, with a smile.

‘You don’t know where it is?’

‘I don’t,’ said Drusher. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t help you.’

‘Did he mention anywhere else? Any other names? Anything?’

‘No, I’m sorry, he didn’t. He’s a very closed person, Voriet. *You* know that. He doesn’t trust anyone. I was hardly his friend.’

Voriet nodded. ‘All right.’

‘You sure you won’t have some caffeine?’

‘No,’ said Voriet. ‘Thank you, magos. I’m sorry to have intruded.’

The lights faded away. The night highway was empty and quiet. Drusher closed the blinds and sat back down to his work. The raptor clacked its beak.

‘Shut up,’ said Drusher. ‘It wasn’t a *big* lie. I just decided something was... classified.’

He sipped his mug of caffeine. He thought for a moment, then got up and took the bag Eisenhorn had given him out of the chest of drawers. He opened it and looked at the fat blocks of pristine currency bonds inside, each bundle mint but non-sequential, wrapped together with treasury ribbons.

A lot of money. Enough for passage off-world, and not steerage class either. Passage to Gudrun, or Sameter, or any number of worlds with extraordinary flora and fauna. Work enough for several more lives, several more taxonomies. And enough cash left over to afford a little juvenat work so he would *last* those several more lives.

Or, enough currency to buy a nice place in Tycho City or Unkara Town. A really nice place. The sort of place you could retire in and live happily. Especially if you weren’t alone.

Walks in the hills. Sketching. Observing. A good supper every night. Long conversations about everything and anything. Anything she ever

wanted to talk about, really.

And time to write a decent treatise on non-indigenous fauna, specifically *Chaopterae metalepta*, which Drusher had a feeling would soon be a problem for agriculture in the northern provinces.

Time for anything, in fact. He could wait for it. He could wait for the lights to come back, because he knew they would. Next week, maybe the week after. Soon.

He smiled to himself. He offered the last slice of cured ham to the raptor. It fluttered down from the dresser and stood on the table, taking the offering from his hand almost daintily.

The lamplight caught its dark and bottomless eyes. For a moment, they reflected a violet flash.

It was almost exactly the same shade of violet that Drusher had seen in Eisenhorn's eyes when the inquisitor had smiled at him for the very first and very last time.

CHRONOLOGY

075 (M41) – ‘Pestilence’

198 – Gregor Eisenhorn born, DeKere’s World.

Circa 219 – Endor and Eisenhorn serve as interrogators under Inquisitor Hapshant. ‘Master Imus’ Transgression’

222 – Eisenhorn appointed full inquisitor.

223 – ‘Regia Occulta’

240 – *Xenos*

241 – ‘Missing in Action’

304 – Gideon Ravenor born.

312 – Midas Betancore dies. His daughter Medea is an infant.

Circa 345 – *Malleus*

– Ravenor crippled.

346 – Ravenor appointed full inquisitor.

355 – ‘Backcloth For A Crown Additional’

Circa 360 – ‘The Strange Demise of Titus Endor’

386 – *Hereticus*

402 – *Ravenor*

– ‘Thorn Wishes Talon’

Circa 403 – *Ravenor Returned*

– Valentin Drusher born.

404 – *Ravenor Rogue*

441 – *Magos Drusher arrives on Gershom to begin taxonomy.*
448 – ‘The Curiosity’
450 – *Medea Betancore disappears.*
455 – ‘Gardens of Tycho’
461 – *Alizebeth Bequin’s stasis-suspended body reported missing.*
Circa 465 – ‘The Keeler Image’
Circa 470 – ‘Perihelion’
Circa 475 – The Magos
477 – Beta Bequin “born”, Sancour, Angelus Subsector.
Circa 480 – Eisenhorn arrives on Sancour. Medea begins watching Beta.
Circa 495 – Ravenor arrives on Sancour
Circa 500 – Pariah

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor books. He is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Horus Rising*, *Legion*, *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He also scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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For Ben Fisher – this is what it looks like when the goblins are out.

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